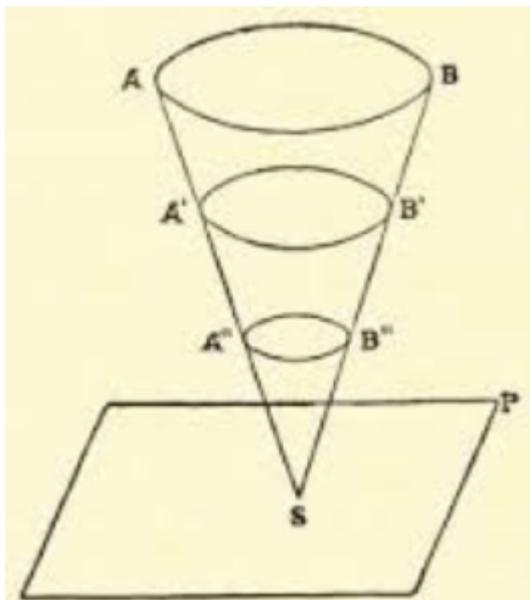


1896: *The Year of Memory* (January 2018)

In 1896, Chekhov's play *Uncle Vanya* was first performed in Moscow. The play, in which the lives of some of the characters are lived out in an endless succession of boredom, is an important comment on time and its passage. Thus, Vanya and his niece Sonya are trapped in the present, looking forward to death in the future when they can 'live' whilst, all the while, being plagued by involuntary memories from the past. At the end of the play, Vanya and Sonya ruminates on the departure of the Professor and Astrof, concluding that their place is to remain on the estate and keep the accounts in good order. For Sonya, this sacrifice of dreams and aspirations is fair exchange for a glorious afterlife, in which they will be rewarded for their hard work on earth. In the same year, French philosopher Henri Bergson published *Matter and Memory*, in which he offers an exposition on involuntary memory, illustrated in his cone of memory. Bergson illustrates memory using an upside-down cone:



Bergson's cone of memory. (From Bergson, 1896/1910, p. 211)

In Bergson's diagram, the square P represents the plane of existence (i.e. where we happen to be) and S the present (or sensori-motor mechanisms that we experience in the present moment), S being the point at which memory is closest to action. The cone grows at each successive moment but the present always remains the same. Because the cone is upside down, we see point AB (joined by a curved line) "in the measure that we detach ourselves from our sensory and motor state to live in the life of dreams" (Bergson, 1896/1910, p. 211). Points A''B'' and

A'B' (both joined by a curved line) represent memory gaining depth as it moves from the plane of existence. Point AB is the furthest point from S and is thus richer in memories as we carry a heavier and heavier load with us; it is, as Rudolf Bernet (2005) notes, “the evanescence of the present is ballasted by the *weight* of the past that not only saves the present from foundering in nothingness but that also gives it a dimension of *depth*” (p. 70). Point AB, being the richest in memory, is also the most “dilated level thus represent[ing] a dream-plane, the most languid and expansive of all memories, where memories can elaborate themselves for their own sake instead of being subordinated to a current interest” (Grosz, 2004, p. 181).

For Bergson, memory was either habit memory or memory proper. Habit memory is action-oriented and future seeking, appearing as action rather than representation, as a combination of sensation and idea. Memory proper, or pure memory represents and recalls the past, just as perception reconstructs the material image; spontaneous, it is concentrated in the past. This kind of memory is similar to what happens when we dream. When pure memory and action found in habit memory are at their closest point, the process of recognition occurs and pure memory is displaced by habit memory. Habit memory “appears through conscious effort, through repeated learning; [pure memory] occurs spontaneously and often unbeckoned” (Grosz, 2004, p. 171).

For Vanya and his niece, time is a cruel master. They must live out their lives, completing the necessary tasks to keep themselves and others alive. Because Sonya recognizes the drudgery of her existence and how this will be played out long into the future, she is prepared to live in this way, in the hope that her afterlife will be better. She can cope with the daily routines, the predictability of the changing seasons and her aging reflection in the mirror; these are things she expects and can therefore accept them as part of her existence. What she cannot control, however, is the pure memory described by Bergson and illustrated by his cone. Sonya will be hit repeatedly by a succession of involuntary memories that act as the force of time itself. It is this uncontrollable reality of the past invading the present that gives each one of us a glimpse of our futures.