



Refusing the Reality Pill

A Film Studies Perspective on Prosthetic Memory

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REFUSING THE REALITY PILL: A FILM STUDIES PERSPECTIVE ON PROSTHETIC MEMORY

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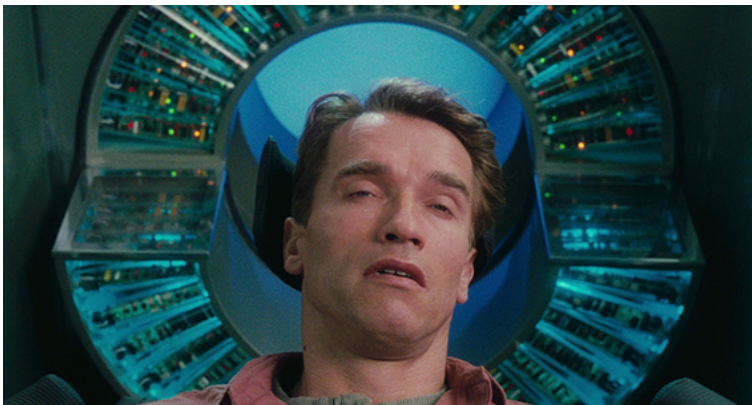
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This article is a critique of Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory. It has been highly influential in the fields of history and cultural memory studies, but here the focus is on the concept's basis in film theory and on its roots in the analysis of *Total Recall* and *Blade Runner*, science fiction movies that dramatize issues of memory and identity. Key aspects of these movies' narrative design, however, undermine Landsberg's central argument that prosthetic memories have the potential to transform film spectators in a progressive, utopian direction.



Blade Runner (Final Cut 2007): Harrison Ford as Rick Deckard. Filmcompagniet/Warner.

In academic discussions of how popular media present history, references to Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory have become almost ubiquitous. The concept has grown out of an analysis of a pair of science fiction movies that dramatize issues of memory and identity. The aim of the present article is to examine Landsberg's work from a film studies perspective. I shall argue that the concept of prosthetic memory gives a misleading suggestion of the degree and kind of impact that dramatically engaging movies or other kinds of popular audiovisual fictions have on spectators' personalities.



Total Recall (1990): Quaid (Arnold Schwarzenegger) in the prosthetic memory apparatus, just before he loses consciousness and the adventure (or the dream) begins. Frame grab, Total Recall Ultimate Recall Edition Blu-Ray, Studiocanal/Universal 2012.

Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory derives from two science fiction films, *Blade Runner* (1982/Director's Cut 1992/Final Cut 2007) and *Total Recall* (1990); both take place in worlds where literal prosthetic memories exist. She extends the concept metaphorically to describe the kind of vicarious experience of the past we may get from historical films and other media representations of the past. I shall argue, however, that both films portray prosthetic memory as something sinister, with associations of manipulation and brain-washing; in particular, my discussion of the movie *Total Recall* will show that a key aspect of the movie's narrative design undermines Landsberg's central argument for seeing prosthetic memories as having a radical, utopian, transformative potential.

Moreover, much of the film theory Landsberg draws on points in the same direction. While Landsberg has astute things to say about the embodied, direct character of the spectator's experience of moving pictures, she relies on film theories that present the film experience as disembodied and deceptive. I shall argue that the concept of prosthetic memory is fundamentally flawed, because the associations of falsity and manipulation are too strong to escape, and I advise against using it. Instead, film theories like Torben Grodal's can give an account of spectators' engagement with films that explains how they can produce the kind of personal experience and understanding the concept was meant to describe.

Caught Up In Movies

Landsberg's essay "Prosthetic Memory: *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall*" first appeared in 1995 in a special issue of the journal *Body & Society* (Landsberg 1995), also published as a free-standing cyber-culture anthology with the same pagination (Featherstone and Burrows 1996). The essay was reprinted in two other anthologies (Bell and Kennedy 2000; Redmond 2004), and was then expanded to form the first chapter of her book *Prosthetic Memory* (Landsberg 2004). The article in its various incarnations has been cited more than a hundred times and the book 565 times, according to Google Scholar (consulted on 19 September 2015). There is another 2003 article by Landsberg which is also called "Prosthetic Memory," but which has a different subtitle and contains different material (Landsberg 2003). The many citations testify to the wide attention the concept of "prosthetic memory" has received [1]. The concept's basis in films and film studies has remained unexamined, however, even in detailed review essays (like, for instance, Berger 2007; Munslow 2007).

At the beginning of *Prosthetic Memory*, Landsberg defines the concept in the following way:

This book argues that modernity makes possible and necessary a new form of public cultural memory. This new form of memory, which I call *prosthetic memory*, emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum. In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history [...]. In the process that I am describing, the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. (Landsberg 2004, 2)

The "personal, deeply felt" aspect is crucial; this is what differentiates the prosthetic memory from regular historical knowledge. Landsberg credits modern media like the cinema with the ability to affect spectators on this deep, personal level. "To me, this is memory and not simply knowledge of history, because it involves an affective relationship to the past" (Landsberg 2007, 628). What we know is of course also something we remember, but the distinction Landsberg is getting at is a well-established one in memory research: the distinction between *semantic memory* (Landsberg's "knowledge"), the things we remember as facts, without any personal, affective dimension – that, for instance, the Lumière brothers' first public film show took place at the Grand Café in Paris on 28 December 1895; and *episodic* or *autobiographical memory* (simply "memory" to Landsberg), the things we remember with a personal flavor – like the fascination I felt when I sat down in the reconstruction of the room at the Grand Café at the big Lumière exposition in Paris in 2015 (for an overview of memory research and terminology, see Markowitsch 2010). Because of the ability of fiction films to absorb us emotionally, the experience of watching one will often feel more like an autobiographical memory than a semantic one (see Tybjerg forthcoming).

Landsberg does not go into a great deal of detail about how this experiential process works, but she does refer on several occasions to the concept of "suture." Psychoanalytic film theory has metaphorically extended the concept from meaning the surgical stitching-together of a wound to describe the supposed process through which film spectators become absorbed by movies, immersing themselves in their stories and being "stitched" into the film. Landsberg refers to "suture" in both her initial definition of prosthetic memory and elsewhere, relying on psychoanalytic film theory: "What I find interesting in this work on spectatorship is that film is imagined as an instrument with the power to 'suture' viewers into pasts they have not lived. [...] Like cinema, television and experiential museums also provide the occasion for individual spectators to suture themselves into history, to develop prosthetic memories." (Landsberg 2004, 14; citing Silverman 1986) [2].

In film theory, the concept of suture developed during the 1970s (for a sympathetic account, see Cubitt 2014). Its basic postulate is that after an initial immersion in the film image, the film spectator becomes (unconsciously) aware of the frame, and thereby also aware that the origin of the film itself is absent, hidden; but this anxiety-inducing awareness is assuaged by a cut to another camera setup that shows the absent space, re-immersing the spectator in an illusion of fictional wholeness. Particularly important here, it is claimed, is the linking of camera setups to the gazes of characters: "In the shot-reverse shot, for example, cuts from one speaker or protagonist

to another allow the spectator to put himself or herself in the position of whichever character is offscreen at any moment; and thus to experience being caught up in, and part of, the space and the action on the screen" (Kuhn and Westwell 2012, s.v. "suture").

The suture concept suffers from a number of problems. It has no basis in evidence, relying entirely on speculative psychoanalytic claims (Carroll 1988, 183-99; Allen 1995, 34-39), and even its basic theoretical terms like "frame" seem arbitrary (Branigan 2006, 133-45). The degree to which Landsberg is beholden to the tenets of suture theory criticized by Carroll, Allen, and Branigan is unclear; but in at least three ways, suture theory contradicts her own description of the workings of prosthetic memory.

A fundamental aspect of suturing is that it is a process of illusion that is not consciously perceived by spectators, but deceptively and fraudulently conceals itself from them: "This sleight-of-hand involves attributing to a character within the fiction qualities which in fact belong to the machinery of enunciation: the ability to generate narrative, the omnipotent and coercive gaze, the castrating authority of the law" (Silverman 1983, 232; 1986, 234). Prosthetic memories, on the other hand, do not pass themselves off as something they are not. Landsberg is quite explicit that prosthetic memories are not deceptive: "Calling these memories prosthetic not only signals their usefulness, but also calls attention to their artificiality, to their unnaturalness. One uses them like memories, and even comes to own them, but *never* confuses them with one's own lived experiences" (Landsberg 2007, 629; emphasis added).

The usefulness that Landsberg refers to in this passage is an extension of one's imaginative sympathies to include pasts that are not one's own: "being put in the position of seeing through someone else's eyes might change how one sees the world and one's place in it" (Landsberg 2004, 101). But although Landsberg does not say so explicitly, there must necessarily be a cognitive component to this, since it specifically involves *historical* narratives – films that, even though they are fictional films and not documentaries, still purport to show actual events. If they are to be useful in the way Landsberg argues they can be, spectators must be aware that the viewpoints they are invited to assume belong to someone else, and that they belong in the past. Yet suturing, as it is usually described, is an effect produced by all mainstream movies equally, not just historical films. Moreover, its operations are supposed to take place irresistibly – "We want suture so badly that we'll take it at any price" – and unconsciously – "the viewer's real relation to the cinema is concealed by an imaginary one" (Silverman 1983, 212, 216).

Finally, Landsberg repeatedly emphasizes that prosthetic memories are embodied: "these memories, like an artificial limb, are actually worn on the body; these are sensuous memories produced by an experience of mass-mediated representations" (Landsberg 2004, 20); "as memories are taken on and experienced sensuously, they become grounded in a person's body" (Landsberg 2004, 148). In support of this, she refers to the book *The Cinematic Body* by film theorist Steven Shaviro. But while Landsberg does acknowledge that Shaviro's work represents a "shifting emphasis" from psychoanalytically based theory (Landsberg 2004, 163 n62; also 167 n24), Shaviro puts it in much stronger terms: "The psychoanalytic model for film theory is at this point utterly bankrupt; it needs not to be refined and reformed, but to be discarded altogether" (Shaviro 1993, ix). This includes its central "themes" like suture, which "must be abandoned" (Shaviro 1993, 265). The psychoanalytic model seeks to subordinate the image to textuality and discursivity; for suture theorists, as Sean Cubitt writes, "the first important thesis is that any film is a discourse" (Cubitt 2014, 453). But this view "suppresses the body," in Shaviro's opinion: "It ignores or abstracts away from the primordial forms of raw sensation: affect, excitation, stimulation and repression, pleasure and pain, shock and habit" (Shaviro 1993, 27).

As Landsberg describes them, then, prosthetic memories are embodied and they allow one to take on the perspectives of others, but without them becoming confused with one's own memories. However, suture theory and the psychological mechanisms it purports to describe cannot account for them, and we should look at whether other film theories might be able to give a more plausible explanation for the experiential effects Landsberg describes. But before we do that, we need to examine the conceptual basis for the notion of prosthetic memory. Here, Landsberg does not rely on either theories of spectatorship or psychology of memory. Instead, she presents interpretations of two science fiction films where literal prosthetic memories are part of the plot, and then extends the concept metaphorically. The films do not, however, present prosthetic memory the way she says; moreover, the metaphorical extension integral to her argument has implications that run directly counter to her theoretical suppositions.

Artificial Humans, Real Memories

In certain science fiction universes, technology has made it possible to implant artificial memories into people's minds, providing them with actual prosthetic memories. In *Blade Runner*, artificial humans exist, and some are given artificial memories to make them more human-like. In the world of *Total Recall*, there are private enterprises that sell memories, artificial experiences like travels to outer space locations that would be much too expensive for most people in the fictional world to visit in person. In both cases, the implications of the notion of prosthetic memory are disturbing and sinister, and Landsberg's attempts to portray it as something liberating and empathy-enhancing are correspondingly unconvincing. I will go into some detail in my discussion of the films; the point is not to do film criticism, but Landsberg's explanation of what prosthetic memory is and how it works depends as much on the interpretation of these films as it does on psychology or film theory,

and it is necessary to show clearly how these interpretations fail. I will begin with *Blade Runner*, but I shall focus mostly on *Total Recall*, since it makes prosthetic memory much more central to its plot.

In *Blade Runner*, only the most advanced artificial humans ("replicants") are given prosthetic memories to make them think they are real humans, and only one (or perhaps two) such replicants appear in the film. One is the glamorous Rachel (Sean Young), who is initially unaware that she is a replicant; later, the film's hero, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) – a cop who hunts down and liquidates runaway replicants – reveals to her that he is familiar with some of her most private childhood memories: they are implants, so she must be a replicant. The other replicant with prosthetic memories may be Deckard himself: in the Director's Cut and Final Cut versions of the film, Deckard dreams of a unicorn. At the end of the film, Deckard finds a small origami unicorn left for him by Gaff, another replicant-hunter. The paper figure suggests that Gaff knows the recesses of Deckard's mind, and that Deckard must therefore be a replicant too.

Landsberg argues that these plot elements efface the distinction between real and artificial memories, and what matters is what you do with the memories you have, irrespective of their origin: "it might not always be possible to determine whether those memories come from lived experience or are prosthetic. Either way, they become the building blocks from which to construct narratives of the present and visions for the future" (Landsberg 2004, 41). This is problematic, however; not only does it blur the distinction between real and prosthetic that Landsberg elsewhere tries to maintain, but it suggests a hopefulness I think is unwarranted: except in the tacked-on, studio-imposed happy ending of the 1982 release version, Deckard and Rachel have no future. As replicants, they have only brief lifespans; ending the film with the two of them in an elevator, going down, is strongly suggestive of doom. Given *Blade Runner's* obvious debt to film noir, it is difficult not to be reminded of the ending of John Huston's seminal *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), where Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart), having turned the woman he loves over to the police after realizing that she was a murderer, watches the cops take her down in the elevator, and then turns and begins walking down the stairs: both are doomed, even if the descent of one will be a bit slower than that of the other.

The artificiality of the prosthetic memories in *Blade Runner* is deeply disquieting, because it means that they can be accessed by the powerful. Your past is no longer your own. The only freedom lies in fatalistically living life to the fullest from the moment you realize this; only the memories that come after becoming aware that you are a replicant are worth cherishing, because only those can be known to be real. The fugitive replicants chased by Deckard lack prosthetic memories: they know that they are artificial people. Their leader Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) gives a dying speech (famous enough to have its own wikipedia.com entry, viz. "Tears in rain monologue") to Deckard, whose life he has magnanimously spared:

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears...in...rain. Time to die.



Blade Runner (Final Cut 2007): Rutger Hauer as Batty. Filmcompagniet/Warner.

Batty is a compelling figure with the glamour and power of a rebel angel, but the tragic grandeur of his words on the evanescence of memory would be undercut completely if it turned out that the sights he recalls were just part of the standard-issue starship trooper memory package. We come to empathize with Batty, to see him as fully human and his death as a tragedy, precisely because he has memories that are his own. Landsberg is mistaken to regard *Blade Runner* as a demonstration of the emancipatory potential of prosthetic memories: on the contrary, the replicants' freedom and humanity depend on having real memories and knowing the illusory ones for what they are.

It's like a Dream

Total Recall is a big-budget action movie (at the time, one of the most expensive movies ever made), presenting itself as noisy and violent pulp entertainment. Douglas Quaid (Arnold Schwarzenegger) is a construction worker who dreams of visiting Mars. He goes to Rekall, a company that sells prosthetic memories, to buy a memory of having been to Mars, with an alternate identity as a secret agent. Something apparently goes wrong with the procedure, and suddenly he is being pursued by trained killers, his wife attacks him, claiming that she is not his wife, and he discovers a mysterious video message, recorded by himself, telling him to go to Mars. On Mars, a group of rebels is fighting the tyrannical governor Coahaagen, who oppresses the lower classes, many of whom have suffered disfiguring mutations. Quaid finds his way to the rebels, but is tracked down by Coahaagen's minions, who kill the rebel leader. In a new video, Quaid's alter ego explains that his name is actually Hauser, and he is Coahaagen's trusted lieutenant, a smug, jeering villain. All Quaid's memories are artificial; Hauser had them implanted, suppressing his own identity in order to infiltrate the rebels. But when Quaid is put in the machine to be turned back into Hauser, he breaks free. Coahaagen turns off the air supply in the sector of the Mars colony where the rebels are concentrated, but just as everyone is about to suffocate, Quaid manages to activate a huge machine built by aliens, bringing breathable air to the whole of Mars, saving himself and all the rebels.

What Landsberg finds particularly appealing in this story is the protagonist's choice to embrace his prosthetic memories. He elects to stay Quaid, even though he knows that "Quaid" is an artificial construct. He prefers that to being turned into the evil Hauser, even though he learns that Hauser is his authentic self. She thinks this is a hopeful message: "By the end of *Total Recall*, Quade [*sic*] understands that his is not an authentic identity, but he decides to live as Quade because that identity, unlike that of Hauser, is the one that permits him to have empathy for the Mutants. As the film demonstrates, the acquisition of prosthetic memories is a crucial step toward learning how to experience empathy" (Landsberg 2004, 47).

There is another side to the story, however, noticed even at the time of the film's first release by observant reviewers like Roger Ebert (Ebert 1990). There are a number of indications that the whole of *Total Recall*, from the point where Quaid is put into the machine at Rekall, is in fact itself the prosthetic memory he has bought from the company [3]. When the salesman at Rekall describes the "Ego Trip" – the secret agent add-on to Quaid's prosthetic memory of a trip to Mars – what he outlines is the story of the movie: "You are a top operative back under deep cover on your most important mission. People are trying to kill you left and right. You meet this beautiful exotic woman. I don't want to spoil it for you, Doug, but you rest assured that by the time the trip is over, you get the girl, kill the bad guys, and save the entire planet" (00:15:38-00:15:58) [4]. Quaid can pick the characteristics of the exotic woman from a menu ("Slim, athletic, or voluptuous?" [00:17:35-00:17:38]), and a picture of the woman of his specifications appears on a screen. She is the woman, Milena (Rachel Ticotin), he will meet in the rebel hideout on Mars and with whom he will share a final kiss as the newly air-filled atmosphere of Mars turns the sky blue. And as the memory program is loaded into the machine, a technician mentions that its title is "Blue sky on Mars" (00:16:53).

Nor is this all. In a key scene about an hour into the film, Quaid receives a visit in the hotel room where he is staying from Dr. Edgemar, a man we have previously glimpsed in a Rekall commercial. He explains to Quaid that everything he has experienced is a dream of sorts, but not exactly the prosthetic memory he had ordered. He has suffered a "schizoid embolism" and become lost in his own mind. Edgemar has been inserted into his mind to help him:

With no one to guide you out, you'll be stuck in permanent psychosis. [...] The walls of reality will come crashing down. One minute, you'll be the savior of the rebel cause, and the next thing you know, you'll be Coahaagen's bosom buddy. You'll even have fantasies about alien civilizations, as you requested, but in the end, back on Earth, you'll be lobotomized. (01:04:51-01:05:10)



Total Recall (1990): Dr.

Edgemar (Roy Brocksmith) offers the reality pill to Quaid (Arnold Schwarzenegger) while his wife Lori (Sharon Stone) looks on. (Frame grab, *Total Recall* Ultimate Rekall Edition Blu-Ray, StudioCanal/Universal 2012).

Edgemar gives Quaid a pill he has to swallow as a sign of his acceptance that he is caught in a dream. Quaid sees a bead of sweat running down Edgemar's face, but since Edgemar should feel no fear if he was merely an imaginary projection, Quaid concludes he must be a real person trying to trick him and blows his brains out with his handgun. Everything Edgemar described then comes to pass: walls come crashing down (again and again), Quaid finds out he is Coahaagen's henchman Hauser, and with the help of the cyclopean power plant left behind by mysterious aliens, he saves the rebels. As they look up at the newly-blue sky, Milena says, "I can't believe it. It's like a dream." Quaid turns to her and says: "I just had a terrible thought. What if this is a dream?" She replies: "Then kiss me quick before you wake up" (01:49:18-01:49:32). As they kiss, white light fills the screen. The End.

Landsberg does not mention any of these indications that the whole story of *Total Recall* may be a dream. The director, Paul Verhoeven, has said on a number of occasions that the dream/reality ambiguity was what attracted him to the project, and in the commentaries he has recorded for DVD editions of the film, he repeatedly emphasizes the elements that support the dream interpretation. He suggests, for instance, that the white light at the end is Quaid being lobotomized, his consciousness extinguished: "That's why we faded to white instead of going to black, because his brains are blown out" (Schwarzenegger and Verhoeven [2001], 01:50:02-01:50:08; cf. Verhoeven 2012, 00:25:04-00:25:39) [5].

Landsberg's claims about the empathy-building potential of prosthetic memories require that Quaid's moral choice to remain Quaid is a real choice and not just part of the "Ego Trip": he must choose to tear himself free from the machine to avoid being turned (back) into Hauser, to be a champion of the oppressed rather than the tyrant's heartless henchman. But if the whole story is really a prosthetic memory gone awry, Quaid's crucial choice is to refuse the pill given him by Edgemar, electing to stay in the action fantasy.

As Verhoeven astutely points out, the audience will want Quaid to make this choice, because they also want the action fantasy to go on, however implausible it is. The script teasingly makes explicit this implausibility. When Quaid reacts to Edgemar's explanations with an incredulous "Bullshit!" Edgemar replies: "What's bullshit, Mr. Quaid? That you're having a paranoid episode triggered by acute neuro-chemical trauma? Or that you're really an invincible secret agent from Mars who's the victim of an interplanetary conspiracy to make him think he's a lowly construction worker?" (01:03:33-01:03:52). In interviews, Verhoeven has stated less circumspectly than in the DVD extras that he believes the first to be true, but that the second is so irresistible to both Quaid and the audience that they embrace it anyway:

The quintessence of the film is that Quaid likes the dream so much that he does not want to wake up. He does not hesitate to pull the wool over his own eyes. [...] And the funny thing is that the public wants it too. I have noticed in the cinema that during the scene in the hotel room, the audience are watching very quietly, almost grinding their teeth, as if to say, "Damn, we haven't been watching a dream for an hour, have we? Surely we're not going back to the beginning?" And to their relief Arnold then takes them further on his journey by shooting the doctor. But it remains a dream.
(Verhoeven quoted in Scheers 1997, 222-23)

Prosthetic memories in *Total Recall* turn out to be much like Hollywood movies (the analogy is explored in some detail in Karpf 1998); so much more alluring than the real world that people will immerse themselves in them even though they know what's going to happen, and even though they know that they will burn their brains out, unable to get back to reality. *Total Recall* contradicts the idea that the acquisition of prosthetic memories might, even potentially, be beneficial and politically progressive: the film portrays prosthetic memory as deceptive but irresistible wish-fulfilment, fraudulent and dangerous yet willingly embraced. We need better theoretical tools.

Apparatuses of Deception

One of the things that have made Landsberg's work attractive to many historians, I think, is her optimistic suggestion that the experience of history through popular media might "affect people both intellectually and emotionally, in ways that might ultimately change the way they think and how they act in the world" (Landsberg 2004, 154). I share this hope. Equally important are her efforts to defend immersive, mass-cultural forms of history from the disapproving and censorious view of mass culture in critical theory and among some traditionalist historians. The manufactured character of mass media works, argues Landsberg, allow them to reach large, popular, and – more importantly – diverse audiences:

Part of the work of this book is to argue against those critics who see the commodification of mass culture in purely negative terms, those who regard mass culture as a site of domination, deception, and brain-washing of the masses. Against the "culture industry" model, I contend that commodification, which is at the heart of mass cultural representations, makes images and narratives widely available to people who live in different places and come from different backgrounds, races, and classes.
(Landsberg 2004, 20-21)

However, the notion of "prosthetic memory" itself plays into the very model of domination and deception to which Landsberg objects.

The culture industry model, of course, springs from the chapter "Enlightenment as Mass Deception: The Culture Industry" in Horkheimer and Adorno's book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* from 1947. They charge the movies not only with being commodities, but with deceptively offering themselves as real and with overwhelming the critical faculties of spectators through the slickness of their presentation:

Far more strongly than the theatre of illusion, film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination—contained by the film's framework but unsupervised by its precise actualities — without losing the thread; thus it trains those exposed to it to identify film directly with reality. The withering of imagination and spontaneity in the consumer of culture today need not be traced back to psychological mechanisms. The products themselves, especially the most characteristic, the sound film, cripple those faculties through their objective makeup. They are so constructed that their adequate comprehension requires a quick, observant, knowledgeable cast of mind but positively debar the spectator from thinking, if he is not to miss the fleeting facts.
(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 99-100)

Arguably, the brilliantly sardonic trick of *Total Recall* lies in repackaging this dour critique of Hollywood's assembly-line disciplining of the human mind as a \$60 million Arnold Schwarzenegger action extravaganza; it makes the audience gleefully complicit in their enslavement to the Hollywood machine. It is very hard to get away from the brain-washing associations of "prosthetic memory," particularly when the film that gives us the literal version of it presents it as precisely a form of brain-washing; this framing remains whenever the concept is extended metaphorically.

Much of the film theory Landsberg draws on points in the same direction. She discusses the 1930s empirical studies of youthful moviegoers financed by the Payne Fund, but neglects to mention that they were part of a concerted effort to "get the goods on the movies, to nail them to the wall" (Sklar 1994, 134) – an effort, in other words, to strengthen movie censorship driven by fears that the movies implanted socially undesirable ideas into the heads of young people, brain-washing them into becoming criminals and sex fiends (see Sklar 1994, 134-40; Black 1996, 151-55; see also Jowett, Jarvie, and Fuller 1996). We saw earlier how the spectre of brain-washing is also raised by suture theory, with its emphasis on the fundamentally deceptive nature of popular movies. Apparatus theory, its close relation, which Landsberg mentions approvingly (Landsberg 2004, 14; 2015, 45), is even more unhelpful.

The premise of apparatus theory, based on the structuralist Marxist theory of Louis Althusser, is that the cinematic experience is fundamentally deceptive in ways that serve capitalist ideology (Baudry 1970; 1986). The basic set-up of the movie-going experience returns the spectator "to a regressive state of imaginary wholeness and transcendence, and bound into structures of fantasy, dream, and desire that are consonant with dominant ideology" (Kuhn and Westwell 2012, s.v. "cinematic apparatus (apparatus theory)"). The theory was first formulated at the end of the 1960s in the militantly leftist French film journal *Cinéthique*, which was hostile to all kinds of regular narrative filmmaking, with "denunciations of the whole of the output of Hollywood considered as the monolithic representative of a monolithic entity: 'bourgeois ideology' or dominant ideology" (Harvey 1978, 95). Even at the time, many found the kind of structuralist maximalism espoused by the apparatus theorists unconvincing, as Richard Wolin points out in his book about French Maoism in the 1968-1974 period, *The Wind from the East*: "By fetishizing structure as an unyielding, ontological constant and by dismissing subjectivity as, in essence, one of structure's ideological effects, Althusser and his supporters had rashly discounted the masses' capacity for resistance" (Wolin 2010, 160).

An account based on apparatus theory would therefore be even less likely than one based on critical theory to give any grounds for hope that the experience of historical pasts through popular media might let people learn "to see differently, as if through someone else's eyes" (Landsberg 2007, 628) and thereby potentially change how they think and act. The theory entails that the media subject them to a process of domination and brain-washing even more totalizing than that described by critical theory [6].

The idea of seeing differently is central to Landsberg's work; she attempts to show that the cinema (like other forms of popular media) throughout its history "has authorized and enabled people to inhabit subject positions and pasts through which they might not themselves have lived and to which they have no 'natural' connection" (Landsberg 2004, 14); and that the resulting experiences may change people's minds in ways that potentially advance social justice: "In allowing us to see as if through others' eyes, they open up the possibility of empathy, helping us to construct bridges in the face of difference" (Landsberg 2007, 629). But Landsberg's attempts to open up such possibilities are undercut by her reliance on a theory that describes cinema as an apparatus of deception and domination, unlikely to produce any kind of genuine empathy.

Empathy without Prosthetics

The emphasis Landsberg gives to the idea of seeing "as if through others' eyes" suggests that our affective experience of movies is strongly linked to film characters; it is their experience into which we can enter, undergoing it vicariously. Of the film theorists Landsberg mentions, Steven Shaviro is probably the one given most weight, but there are a number of difficulties with his account of affective experience. Not only is his work explicitly idiosyncratic – "I embrace special pleading and the enthusiasm of the fan as a way of avoiding any appearance of objectivity and universality" (Shaviro 1993, ix) – he also downplays engagement with characters, their goals, beliefs, and desires, and instead regards the film experience as a succession of moments of visceral impact with little concern for the coherence of narrative or character:

I have great difficulty associating faces and names, remembering which actor or character is which. Thus, I am unable to "identify" properly. Instead, I am affected by continuities and cuts, movements and stillnesses, gradations of color or of brightness. (Shaviro 1993, 255)

The work of Murray Smith, on the other hand, deals specifically with the ways spectators engage with film characters. Landsberg makes passing reference (Landsberg 2004, 163 n62; also 167 n24) to his article "Altered States" (Smith 1994), suggesting that one might draw on this work without traducing her intentions, even if she herself does not go beyond a brief reference.

Smith's book *Engaging Characters* (1995) develops the arguments of the article at length. Smith argues that the concept of *identification* (with film characters) is imprecise and in many ways misleading; it fails to capture the gradations of our involvement with film characters. A fundamental aspect is simple *recognition*; on top of this, Smith distinguishes between *alignment* (which character(s) we follow; spatial attachment is a part of this) and *allegiance* (which character(s) we root for). Together, these three types of involvement form the film's *structure of sympathy*; they require "comprehension of the narrative situation and characters," and our emotional responses may be different from the characters' (Smith 1995, 102): if we believe Quaid in *Total Recall* is in the throes of a schizoid embolism, we may feel sorry for him when, with contemptuous relish, he spits the reality pill into the bloody face of Dr. Edgemar's corpse, satisfied he has made the right

choice. But films also engage spectators empathetically, where “we simulate or experience the same affect or emotion experienced by the character” (102). This may be an involuntary response like affective mimicry, where watching others laugh or cry make us do the same, spreading the affect to us as well; or, more consciously, we may “imaginatively project ourselves into their [the characters’] situation, and hypothesize as to the emotions they are experiencing” (97).

Smith calls this deliberate imaginative projection “simulation,” but other cognitive film scholars [7]. like Torben Grodal have argued that empathetic simulation is a much more fundamental aspect of comprehending stories than Smith’s account might suggest. Grodal argues that internal, embodied simulation underlies our cognitive comprehension of characters and narrative: “To understand the character’s situation in depth is to simulate his or her dilemma with eyes, bowels, heart, cognition, and muscles,” he writes in *Embodied Visions* (Grodal 2009, 196). Watching Schwarzenegger’s muscles bulge with effort, the motor action areas of our brains will simulate our own bodies performing the same action, and this simulation is the basis of our cognitive comprehension that he is trying to break free from the restraints fastening him to the seat of the memory machine. Grodal regards simulation of and vicarious experience through fictional characters as fundamental, rather than observation from the outside: “the nucleus of the story experience is that of the first person, because from an evolutionary point of view third-person perspectives, even down to the level of motor activation, are expansions of a first-person perspective. We infer how other people experience things by extrapolating from our own experiences” (165).

By this account, the basis of our engagement with characters is watching them, their bodies and faces. “The face is the most important cue for understanding intentions and emotions of other minds, and the emotions resonate in the viewers via innate resonance systems (mirror neurons)” (Grodal 2009, 198). This body-oriented approach stands in clear opposition to approaches like suture theory, which emphasize the discursive: since the latter tend to frame their inquiries with questions about who “speaks” the images we see, they end up with claims about spectators supposedly putting themselves “in the position of whichever character is *offscreen* at any moment” (Kuhn and Westwell 2012, s.v. “suture”; emphasis added). Instead, Grodal’s theory emphasizes our investment in the characters that are *onscreen*, putting ourselves into their bodies: “In film viewing, we are the body snatchers by letting our self-feelings power some of those characters that we watch. In the cinema, our minds give up control of our own bodies, which are quietly placed in seats in dark rooms, and what enter the eyes are emotionally charged audiovisual data of relevance for the bodies and minds of characters” (Grodal 2009, 193). Grodal’s theory, I submit, is very useful for explaining the kind of embodied, experiential engagement that Landsberg regards as having the potential for expanding one’s feelings of social responsibility through having inhabited pasts different from one’s own [8].

In this article, I have not given a great deal of emphasis to the fact that Landsberg’s work is focused specifically on *historical* films and popular media, but the film theories I have criticized have little to say about the specifics of the historical film either. It is worth pointing out that Grodal’s theory does. The mental processing of the film experience is modelled by Grodal as a flow, the last part of which involves an evaluation of the reality status of what we see, marking the experience as unreal so that we do not duck behind our seats when bullets start flying on the screen. In most movies, we accept the fictional world as given; it would be absurd to accuse *Total Recall* of giving an unfairly biased view of the mutant rebellion of Mars, for instance. But with historical films, the reality status evaluation would also include an acknowledgement that the historical film purports, on some level, to be about the actual past, and a weighing of that claim. Grodal writes of the docudrama, a genre closely related to the historical film: “Because the viewers are aware of the fact that they are watching a reenactment, they may speculate as to its correctness, whereas in the case of the typical realist fiction film the filmmakers are credited with knowledge of the hypothetical phenomena portrayed” (Grodal 2009, 259). The speculations may affect the willingness of spectators to fully engage with characters.

The discussion of the correctness and authenticity or lack thereof in the presentation of historical events through popular media can quickly grow tiresome. It is one that Landsberg sensibly tries to sidestep, enlisting the portrayal of a hyper-mediated future society in *Total Recall* in support of this move: “*Total Recall* systematically undermines any attempt to privilege, or even locate, the authentic” (Landsberg 2004, 43). Yet this is not really the case. Even if we set aside the dream interpretation entirely, I do not agree that Quaid’s decision to resist being turned into Hauser means that he chooses the prosthetic over the authentic. Abstractly regarded, Hauser is the real person, and Quaid is a fake; but from Quaid’s point of view, and more importantly from our point of view – since we have been both spatially and emotionally aligned with him from the start of the film – Quaid is the real person, and Hauser is just a smirking image on a video monitor.



Total Recall (1990): Quaid (Arnold Schwarzenegger) comes face to face with his previous self, the evil Hauser,

henchman of Coahaagen (Ronny Cox). (Frame grab, Total Recall Ultimate ReCall Edition Blu-Ray, Studiocanal/Universal 2012).

And if we accept the film's invitation to entertain the idea that Quaid's adventures on Mars may be a prosthetically implanted fantasy, it is true that it makes the authentic difficult to locate, but to Quaid at least, it evidently makes a great deal of difference whether he is a selfless hero who secures life and social justice for the underclass of an entire society, or an Ego-Tripper who ends up as a lobotomized vegetable. On the emotional level at least, it is misleading to say that "*Total Recall* challenges the value of the distinction between 'reality' and simulation" (Landsberg 2004, 46); on the contrary, the ability to choose the right course of action depends on getting the distinction right. In the case of *Blade Runner*, we have also seen how important it is that the memories lost "like tears in rain" were real and not manufactured. The issue needs a fuller exploration than I can give here, but I would suggest that the same holds true for all those who use popular media to inhabit pasts different from their own and consider whether their experience should form the basis for action.

Conclusion

The concept of prosthetic memory is constructed out of elements from various contradictory, arguably outdated film theories and an imaginative extension of a science-fictional plot device. I have tried to show that it comes with such strong associations of fraudulence, mental manipulation, and brain-washing that it cannot serve the hopeful purposes it is supposed to serve. As we have seen, these brain-washing associations come from both the film-theoretical underpinnings of the concept and from the sci-fi sources of the idea. Accordingly, even though it may be a somewhat quixotic undertaking in view of the popularity of the prosthetic memory concept, I would urge historians and scholars of historical films and other media representations of the past to seek out a more realistic set of theoretical tools.

If we want to argue that historical films offer vicarious experiences of the past which can broaden our understanding of it and allow us to obtain knowledge of it, we need a model of spectatorship that would support such an argument better than Landsberg's does. I have argued that by employing Grodal's theory of embodied spectatorship, we can still understand, explain, and make use of the kind of experiential engagement that allow us to see the past "as if through others' eyes": engaging films leave us with autobiographical memories of the vicarious experiences we have had, movie memories that we do not confuse with reality but still afford us a more personal and empathetic way of inhabiting worlds different from our own.

Notes

[1] The concept is also discussed in her recent book *Engaging the Past* (Landsberg 2015), but the substance of the argument remains the same. [Tilbage]

[2] The text by Silverman (1986) that Landsberg refers to as the basis of her use of the term "suture" is an extract from a longer work (Silverman 1983).[Tilbage]

[3] These indications, and the possibility that the bulk of the film could be a "dream," are discussed in many studies of the film, including Scheers (1997, 220-23), Becker (2006, 233-50), Lambie (2012), and Laist (2015, 39-50).[Tilbage]

[4] All timings are taken from the 2012 European Blu-Ray edition of the film: *Total Recall* Ultimate ReCall Edition, StudioCanal/Universal (Europe), 2012.[Tilbage]

[5] In the DVD audio commentary he recorded together with Schwarzenegger in 2001, Verhoeven studiously avoids saying that either the dream or the reality interpretation is more true than the other, although he makes sure to point out whenever the film provides a clue that supports the dream interpretation; when Quaid lies down in the machine and the shot goes out of focus, he remarks: "From now on, boom! the dream starts" (Schwarzenegger and Verhoeven [2001], 00:18:31-00:18:34). In the interview recorded for the 2012 Blu-Ray release of the film, he emphasizes the Dr. Edgemar scene: "For me, the most interesting scene in the movie is really when Dr. Edgemar arrives in Mars and visits Arnold in his hotel room" (Verhoeven 2012, 00:12:13-00:12:24). Verhoeven has explained how he deliberately set up a number of the film's early scenes to resonate with the double reality theme: the wall-screen changing from news broadcast to idyllic landscape, a secretary with color-changing fingernails, Quaid's wife practicing tennis strokes with a hologram: "We need to prepare the audience by all these little visual tricks [to accept] that other worlds are possible" (Verhoeven 2012, 00:11:39-00:11:44). Arnold Schwarzenegger is also, despite his strong identification with the character of Quaid, clearly open to the possibility that the whole thing might be a dream. He writes in his autobiography (referring to Quaid as "I"): "Was I really the hero? Or was it all inside my head, and I'm just a jackhammer operator who may be schizophrenic? Even at the end, you aren't necessarily sure" (Schwarzenegger 2013, 348).[Tilbage]

[6] Strictly speaking, "brain-washing" is imprecise, since apparatus theory would deny that there is a "brain," an independent subjectivity, at all. There is only washing. That doesn't make it any less totalizing, of course.[Tilbage]

[7] Cognitive film theory emerged out of dissatisfaction with the speculative and very broad claims of psychoanalytic film theory, seeking instead to explain cinematic spectatorship with the help of cognitive and perceptual psychology as well as detailed historical study, analytical philosophy, evolutionary theory, and neuroscience, especially affective neuroscience. It is not, as some critics seem to think, focused on the computational mind (see, e.g., Shaviro 2008, 50-51), but takes a strong interest in emotion and embodiment as well. A useful selection of articles can be found in a

special issue of the journal *Film Studies* (Barratt and Frome 2006) and in the anthology *Cognitive Media Theory* (Nannicelli and Taberham 2014).[Tilbage]

[8] Carl Plantinga (2009) provides a cognitive approach to cinematic spectatorship that gives greater emphasis to witnessing and sympathetic emotions, but Grodal's focus on immersion through embodied simulation makes his model more pertinent here.[Tilbage]

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