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The Intermeshing of Memory and Personal Identity in *Blade Runner 2049* and *Total Recall*

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the ideas of the philosophers Marya Schechtman, Richard Heersmink and Derek Parfit, to understand how people are affected by their past episodic memories that may or may not be accurate. Significantly, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and *Total Recall* (1990) are two Science Fiction (SF) films that have memory as the central theme and try to philosophically engage with the repercussions of memory implants performed, either consensually or otherwise, on the protagonists—K and Quaid, respectively. Accordingly, an exploration of the types of memory in these two films is attempted in this paper, further augmented by an elongated discussion of the narrative self-constitution view of Schechtman, in an effort to understand whether existing theories are able to ascertain the humanhood, personhood and the continuity of the personal identities of K and Quaid and if not, why so.

Keywords: memories, science fiction, memory implants, humanhood, personhood, personal identities

Officer K of *Blade Runner 2049* and Douglas Quaid of *Total Recall* help us understand the complexities and intricacies of memory as the two trudge through their muddy realities and come to terms with who they are in the disparate cinematic realms that they occupy. The types of memory that are generically recognized in the two films go as follows—working memory (Shaw 11), episodic memory (Shaw 3), semantic memory (Shaw 2), and procedural memory (Bermúdez 181). In placing such an incredible burden on memory, the two films seem to be engaging with Schechtman's idea of persons as subjects and agents capable of arranging their life narratives according to their cognitive and affective memories. The philosopher, Galen

Strawson, played an important role in the formulation of her theory. He differed from Schechtman in that the cohesiveness of the narrative, according to him, was not the *numero uno* idea controlling personal identities. He described himself as an “episodic” and went on to say:

I’m well aware that my past is mine in so far as I am a human being, and I fully accept that there is a sense in which it has special relevance to me* now. At the same time, I have no sense that I* was there in the past and think it is obvious that I* was not there, as a matter of metaphysical fact. (qtd. in “Defense of the Narrative View” 167)

Strawson indubitably meant for the asterisk-marked pronouns to be linked with his present, living self and the unmarked pronouns to be associated with his self in the past.

As claimed by Schechtman, “the four features of personhood” are “moral responsibility”, “prudential concern”, “compensation”, and “survival”—all of which, Strawson accepted, govern his life (“Defense of the Narrative View” 164). His only point of difference from the narrative self-constitution view of personal identity went something along the lines of the following instantiation, where the use of the asterisk is identical to his utilization of it in the original quote—he might have purchased an expensive car yesterday but today when he* has to pay the EMI for it, he* might not identify with he who undertook the transaction in the first place. This undermines the coherence of the person-based narrative that Schechtman had earlier set out to defend. To even out the creases, she distinguished between the narrative accounts of persons and narrative accounts of selves. In order to qualify as a person, one must in addition to fulfilling the previously mentioned four features, acknowledge the implications of the past on one’s present and of the present on one’s future, and thereafter construct a narrative that understands that past and future as one’s own. To qualify as a self, one experiences the past and future as one’s own in the same sense in which one perceives the present as being a part of the whole narrative.

Derek Parfit becomes important when it comes to understanding issues with memory that we confront in the two films as he was the one who sought to solve the problems with identity theory in the form of the circularity objection, that Schechtman explains as being “based on the claim that it is part of the definition of memory that we can only properly be said to remember our own experiences” (“Personhood and Personal Identity” 77). He conceptualised quasi memory (q-memory) to refer to a memory a person has, the origin of which is unknown (“Personhood and Personal Identity” 78). Giving the example of a woman, Jane, who gets the memories of a man, Casey, implanted inside her brain, Schechtman debunks the idea

that q-memories defeat the circularity objection. Having a coherent self-conception unlike the madman who thinks himself to be Napoleon, Jane after having experienced these jarring memories can discern that they do not mesh with her original personhood. This external imposition of quasi desires evoked by memories of an unknown origin, leads to the activation of an identity crisis, the resolution of which leads to a firmly grounded self-conception.

Self, Memory and (SF) Narratives: *Blade Runner 2049* and *Total Recall*

Blade Runner 2049, like its predecessor, stands out because of the brilliance of its philosophical arguments. Memory becomes an important force in the life of Officer K, Joe, or K—the same person with multiple selves. When the movie *Blade Runner 2049* begins, we see K dispensing the very duties which Deckard had been seen to fulfil in the earlier *Blade Runner* (1982). He cold-bloodedly retires an older model of the replicants deemed to be highly dangerous and obsolete with the arrival of new, properly indoctrinated and servile replicants, like Officer K under the Wallace Corporation, who cannot lie to or disobey a human. Ergo, they become the loyal yet “disposable workforce”, a fact that Niander Wallace concedes while murdering a newborn replicant—“Every leap of civilization,” clearly meant to hint at the colonial manichean binary of savages and the civilized, “was built off the back of a disposable workforce” (*Runner* 00:40:56-00:41:01).

K’s marginalized position in society assists in his character being made into a double agent. Unbeknownst to himself, he leads Luv, Wallace’s henchwoman, right to the door of Deckard who holds the key to the miracle the film revolves around. In the case of *Total Recall*, the protagonist seems to be an ordinary working man, Douglas Quaid, notwithstanding that it is hard to reconcile Arnold Schwarzenegger with the ordinary. The movie begins with a dream sequence that turns out to be the driving force behind most of the decisions he makes in his life. His unquenchable desire to go to Mars remains unsuppressed despite his wife’s constant badgering. The two films are markedly different from each other as will be mapped hereon.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, Officer K begins with a quasi-memory he knows does not belong to him as he has no past and was born media res, something he recounts in his statement—“I have memories but they are not real. They are just implants” (*Runner* 00:51:28-00:51:34). He is visibly aware of his status as a replicant and does not accrue any special value to his memory despite being oddly attached to it. From this domain of outright acceptance of his status as a replicant, he is led to believe that he is, in fact, the son of Deckard and Rachel because of circumstantial evidence he finds sprinkled all over the place. When he spotted his

date of birth etched into the rugged bottom of a tree, he sensed trouble in proximity. On scanning the soil beneath the tree, a chest was discovered that turned out to contain skeletal remains of a body. Through the x-ray scan of the remains, Joshi and her associates figure out that the remains were of a woman who died during childbirth. Upon closer inspection, K discovers a serial number engraved on one of her bones. This miracle destroys the myth that humans alone had rights to childbirth—something that could unleash massive outrage if released to the public. K, aided by artifactual memory, both in the form of Joi, K's artificial companion, and tangible evidence such as the wooden horse, the skeletal remains of a pregnant replicant, the picture of Rachel and the date inscribed behind it, comes to believe that the memory he has of himself in an orphanage is authentic. Even Ana Stelline, the memory maker, tells K cryptically that those memories indeed did belong to someone—“Someone lived this, yes. This happened” (*Runner* 01:21:25-01:21:31). Thus, the quasi memory is now identified by Joe as being his own. The question of soul now arises—does this mean that he has one?

K is given the name “Joe” by Joi, a mere receptacle of his memories. In a poignant moment of companionate affection, she says, “A real boy needs a real name—Joe” (*Runner* 01:15:07-01:15:12). But one question pervades the entire narrative—is Joe a real name or merely the programming that has been fed into Joi since, towards the end, when a tired K is seen retiring from the hideout of the rebels, the Joi hologram on the street calls him Joe. The Joi interface could not possibly remember the name as K's personalized Joi had made him destroy the console before they had left the house to make sure that the pursuers lose their trail. It is ironic how K's quasi memories constitute Joi, who in turn gives K a name. Even K identifies the importance of a name when on noticing that Wallace's replicant secretary has a name, he says, “He names you. You must be special” (*Runner* 00:32:20-00:32:24). Since naming is developed as an act of creation in the movie, we see K's memories building him up from nothing quite literally.

Notably, we witness the real human condition in the person of Luv who becomes the fiendish and charming Roy Batty of this *Blade Runner*, in that much like the latter she is both prohibited from choosing for herself and also succumbs to her human mortality towards the end of the movie. Even in the absence of such memories as K is provided with, Luv behaves like a human enough to transcend the human-replicant binary. Her tears in the scene where Wallace murders a replicant for being barren suggest that she feels for her kind just as much as any other human would. Moreover, she had three opportunities to kill off K and be done with the entire affair, but she deferred it for as long as she could and in the end, died at the hands of

the one who had been able to form a self-conception of himself, unlike Luv's predetermined life-path. When Joshi has her fatal encounter with Luv, it is ironic how the replicant reprimands the human for having only one solution for all things—putting one to death. Luv proves to be more human than even Freysa because she puts life above all else (as much as she can manage), whereas the latter pits K against Deckard to protect the miracle from Wallace. Strong, emotional, and authentic memories are what Luv lacks and this lack keeps her at the margins of both the narrative and personhood and stresses the importance of a narrative form of memory that can help one come up with a proper self-conception.

As Joshi says, the narrative becomes all about “Little K fighting for what's his. It's a good one” (*Runner* 00:53:21-00:53:26). The question that then arises is what is his? Subsequent to realizing that the memory was not his own, K nonetheless persists in helping Deckard. This can be explained by identifying his behaviour as a paradigm of vicarious memory. According to David Pillemer, vicarious memories “have qualities that closely resemble memories of first-hand events, including vivid imagery, strong emotional and physical reactions, and long-lasting life influence” (qtd. in Heersmink and McCarroll 102). Vicarious memories are credited with fulfilling the same functional role as personal memories, for instance, assisting in decision-making, creating and upholding social engagements, or in “being incorporated into one's identity” (Heersmink and McCarroll 102). Furthermore, Jacob Climo inadvertently simplifies why K chooses to help Deckard reunite with his daughter when he says about vicarious memories—“such memories evoke powerful feelings in individuals, which link them to important ... events they did not experience directly in their individual lives—but which impact greatly on their identities” (qtd. in Heersmink and McCarroll 102). Despite the memory associated with the wooden horse not being one he had experienced first-hand, this shared memory assists K in contouring and moulding his identity. K and Ana come off as co-dependent as both need the other to survive. The latter needs K and his identical genetic coding to keep the enemies away from her, whereas K needs Ana's memories to maintain the stability within his life-story, eventually exercising the right to choose which brings him very close to being a person. K's and Ana's memories are intermeshed in such a way that they have to be viewed as a distributive memory system. When viewed in this context, it seems that K behaves short-sightedly when he says “All the best memories are hers” (*Runner* 02:28:59-02:29:03). The better perspective would be “All the best memories are theirs” (Heersmink and McCarroll 104).

Conversely, when *Total Recall* begins, Douglas Quaid is portrayed as being unaware of the fact that all he believes to be real is merely a memory implant, to keep him, a double

agent who used to operate on Mars, under sedation. His dissatisfaction with a seemingly perfect life gives hints as to the unrest that lies beneath the quietude. Despite several warnings, he goes to Rekall Corporation and significantly intends to take an ego trip to Mars as a secret agent. After the preliminary shots are administered, and Quaid appears to be all set for the trip, his actual memory begins to trickle down through the layers of fiction it had been hidden under. He becomes erratic in his behaviour and gives the Rekall employees the scares of their lives by attempting to fatally hurt them. The attempted implanting breaks the lid off of the already fragile memory implant set in place by Coahaagen and his people. The uncovered self (Hauser) of Quaid visibly does not align with the life that had been imposed upon him. He is administered multiple shots of a sedative and is put into a cab, with a memory gap and a refund from Rekall, to compound his misery. All events succeeding this suggest that Quaid might have contracted amnesia with regards to his actual memory, but his semantic and procedural memory as the secret agent Hauser seems to be intact. This reminds us of Clive Wearing, the man with a 10-second memory, who suffered from both retrograde and chronic anterograde amnesia but could play on the piano and conduct music nonetheless.

Soon after making a run from his house where he had discovered his wife, now murderous, as being complicit in the entire conspiracy, he is contacted by his friend on the inside and is given instructions to follow. Within a dropped off suitcase, he finds merchandise typical of an SF film. A pre-recorded video comes on. Hauser shows up and pointedly says—“You are not you, you are me” (*Recall* 00:39:39-00:39:43). The entire film works towards dismantling this myth since for Quaid to be able to successfully prove that he was his own person, he has to delineate himself from Hauser. On Mars, Quaid takes a room at the hotel he was directed to and receives a parcel at the reception with a warm greeting along the lines of “Nice to have you back with us Mr Brubecker” (*Recall* 00:51:40-00:51:42). The point the director, Paul Verhoeven, wants to make is that physical continuity does not establish continuity of personal identity. Furthermore, the parcel requires him to ask for Melina in a rundown pub in one of the decrepit sectors of Mars, crawling with rebels. He takes a cab driven by a man called Benny to the pub and is detained on his way by psychics, humans turned into mutants because of the bad quality of the dome. After being spurned by an angry Melina, the girl of his dreams, Quaid returns to his room, where he is approached by Dr Edgemar who claims to want to help Quaid out of his “schizoid embolism” (*Recall* 01:01:54) by making him gulp down a pill. Lori Quaid is also brought in to lend legitimacy to the doctor’s claims. Quaid becomes visibly confused and is almost about to take the pill when he sees a drop of sweat falling from Dr Edgemar’s

face—proving that he was not merely an implant in his brain. He shoots him point-blank, which enrages Lori and a lot of Coahaagen’s troopers storm into the room. Edgemar’s failure suggests that Quaid has been able to construct a fragmentary personhood for himself and is no longer guided by external forces alone. Melina comes in to save Quaid, assuming that since Coohagen wanted him dead he might indeed have some quality information that would assist in flatlining the corrupt Mars government. Quaid runs off with Melina in Benny’s cab, closely followed by Richter and his men. They run into the rebel hideout and meet with Kuato, while the ravaged sector has its oxygen supply cut off for aiding and abetting rebels. Kuato turns out to be a mutant in the form of a protruding baby-shaped mass on George, the rebel’s, stomach. In a symbolic portrayal, the director shows George going into a state of slumber whenever Kuato is active whereas Kuato is dormant when George is up and functioning, suggesting we can have multiple selves within the same person. Kuato leads Quaid down the path of self-conception through the following conversation—

Kuato: What do you want Mr Quaid?

Quaid: The same as you, to remember. (*Recall* 01:19:31-01:19:36)

Quaid feels quite dismembered as he is unable to grasp who he is because of a lack of memories that could be firmly established as being his own. Hence, to Kuato’s “But why?” he answers, “To be myself again” (*Recall* 01:19:37-01:19:40). Kuato vaticinates the oncoming when he says—“You are what you do. A man is defined by his actions, not his memories” (*Recall* 01:19:41-01:19:50). Strikingly, in the quest for his memory, Quaid creates new memories through his actions that ultimately prove stronger than the memories he had so far been longing for. Hereon we see him trying to negotiate between Quaid’s identity and the identity of Hauser. Which self acquires a prominent position in the person of Quaid is what remains to be known at the end of the story—who is the real he?

Post the revitalization of Quaid’s memory through Kuato’s mutant powers, Quaid and Melina come under attack by Richter and the treacherous Benny, who shoots down Kuato. They are escorted to Coahaagen’s office where he reveals the success of his master plan because of Quaid. Hauser turns out to be complicit with Coahaagen in planning this entire subterfuge. To prevent the mutant psychics from reading his mind, Hauser had agreed to have his memory erased altogether and became Quaid. He and Melina are strapped into machines that would turn Quaid back into Hauser, and Melina into a subjugated, submissive lover for Hauser. After Coahaagen and Richter’s leave-taking, Quaid after much struggle is able to release himself and

Melina. The doomed Richter receives Coahaagen's approval to kill Quaid, who had become a real threat because of the revival of his memory of the alien machinery kept hidden by Coahaagen that could melt the frozen core of Mars and release oxygen into the atmosphere. When Quaid reaches the control room of the alien-made oxygen-generating apparatus, after killing Richter and his goons, he is hindered by the deviant Coahaagen who propounds the faulty theory that such a mighty reaction would destroy the planet. He turns his gun on Quaid when he appears determined on turning the machine on, saying "You're nothing. You're nobody. You're a stupid dream. Well all dreams come to an end" (*Recall* 01:41:20-01:41:28). He deprives Quaid of all subjectivity for the sole reason that he had chosen not to be the duplicitous Hauser Coahaagen was friends with. This heralds the beginning of a self-conception in the person of Quaid.

Humanity, Identity, and Personality in *Blade Runner 2049* and *Total Recall*

The two films constantly engage with questions regarding personhood and the continuity of personal identity. The protagonists, Quaid and K, engineer their path towards becoming persons despite undergoing significant psychological discontinuities. Richard Heersmink expounds on the idea that being human is not the same as being a person by specifying that whereas most adult humans qualify as being persons, a foetus or a patient in a vegetative state fails to do the same. He states—"We are born as humans but gradually become persons when our cognitive, emotional, and moral capacities develop" (Heersmink and McCarroll 89). In short, Heersmink mentions, "personhood is a higher-level moral category, whereas humanhood is a lower-level biological category" (Heersmink and McCarroll 89).

The first line that opens up *Blade Runner 2049* reads as "Replicants are bioengineered humans" which differs from the opening of *Blade Runner* which described replicants as being "virtually identical to humans". The sequel places replicants on the same footing as humans. They are also composed of blood, bone, tissue and have coded DNA. There are two instances of this in the text—firstly, when K provides Rachel's DNA to the clerk at Wallace corporation, and secondly when Joi and K go through the DeNAbase to look for the children born on June 10, 2021. Joi notices that while the replicants are made of A, T, G, and C (the building blocks of DNA), she is only made up of the zeros and ones of her binary code. Her anxiety to become human is thus seen when she says that once the console is destroyed, she would only last as long as the emanator survives, following which she would die like a real girl. However, K sidelines the importance of death and makes natality the central matter of concern. In "Nativity

and Finitude”, Anne O’Byrne argues “Death may be Dasein’s ownmost non-relational possibility, separating Dasein from all others, but birth is precisely what puts us in relation with others since, while we each may die alone, we could not have been alone at birth” (qtd. in Treanor 71). K constantly struggles with the question: was he a real boy born because he was wanted and loved? O’Byrne, however, can be seen reducing the distance between replicants and humans significantly by mentioning that “[B]irth happens without our knowledge and every one of us is here for years before we realize it, before we come to find ourselves in the midst of things” (qtd. in Treanor 72). Much like replicants, humans do not experience their births but merely recreate it for themselves from others’ recollection of the event. Furthermore, to retain the wall dividing humans and replicants, NEXUS 9s are made to take “baseline” evaluations. The reiteration of being “interlinked” with others in the test focuses on measuring K’s ability to feel a human connection to others. The blurring of the line in K is registered when Joshi says “With you, I sometimes forget [that you are a replicant]” (*Runner* 00:51:11-00:51:13). The problem, however, is not whether he was born or made, but rather whether he was wanted and loved at birth. The point of inflexion in the movie is arrived at when K is led to believe that the memories implanted in his brain were his by Stelline herself. But then again this does not separate him from the likes of humans as their memory is just as much constructed as K’s is. Brian Treanor says that memory of anything is a “bricolage” of occurrences woven together as if the events had taken place linearly when in all truth “some of those events and impressions did not ‘go together’ in experience”, some might not have taken place at all, or some might have been transposed from someone else’s experience onto one’s own (Treanor 82). Real memories can never be perceived as being archives of our experiences dealing with objective documentation, but rather as being incredibly impressionable.

Quaid, a human, is also seen to look for psychological continuity characteristic of a person in *Total Recall*. The psychological discontinuity he incurs frustrates him since his narrative self is shattered, and so is his subjectivity. Emplotment, as Amy King likes to term it, or generating meaningful connections between personal memories, is identified as being an exercise employing the agency of the subject who is responsible for constructing the narrative, linking the past, present, and the anticipatory future, usually in chronological order, with the constituent strands of the narrative connected not only temporally, but also causally (qtd. in “The Narrative Self”). Oliver Sacks, in describing a patient called Mr Thompson, suffering from Korsakoff syndrome, mentions that since Thompson cannot remember past a few seconds, every time he is called upon to socially engage with someone, he creates a different

narrative. This becomes a proper example of a lack of a narrative self, as Oliver Sacks notes—“Deprived of continuity, of a quiet, continuous inner narrative, he [Mr. Thompson] is driven to a sort of narrational frenzy” (qtd. in Heersmink and McCarroll 94). In the case of Quaid, the continuity is broken thrice—the first time is when Hauser agrees to have his memory erased and become Quaid to bring down the resistance in Mars, the second time is when after preliminary injections, Quaid starts screaming in Rekall Corporation because some of his previous memory had seeped through, and the third time is when Quaid realizes that the real Hauser was a different person than he had portrayed himself as being formerly.

Much like Officer K, Quaid is also made to trudge through questions of natality, as Hauser says to him towards the end—“You see, that’s my body you’ve got there, and, well... I want it back. Sorry to be an Indian giver, but I was here first” (*Recall* 01:26:59-01:27:07). To their creators, K and Quaid both are hitherto merely a part of a disposable workforce with unnatural natality bereft of being wanted or loved. They function on the presumption that neither K nor Quaid will perpetually remain objects. In taking hold of their narrative selves, both the protagonists seem to be well on their way to acquiring personhood. However, personhood or humanhood alone does not suffice when constituting a personal identity. Any conversation about personal identity is wont to begin with John Locke’s theorization about the persistence of personal identity over time. He claimed that for person A at time T1 to be the same as person B at time T2, B must be able to remember A’s thoughts and actions (“Empathic Access” 102). This theory could not support itself in the face of the problem posed by memory implants. Because on a Lockean view, all B at time T2 has to do to become person A at time T1 is show continuity of consciousness, this would mean that Officer K is the same person as Dr Ana Stelline, which we know to not be true. This constitutes one of the many issues usually raised against Locke’s hypothesis (Rocca). This theory also propounds that forgetting any experience would mean that it is not part of one’s self which is known to be untrue. Even though Quaid cannot remember ever being the secret agent Hauser, he does display the semantic and procedural memory of the latter in accomplishing all that was required of him, and more. The non-memory and the later partial memory of Hauser helps Quaid go through a constructive identity crisis and eventually accomplish self-conception.

In trying to understand the persistence of personal identity in K, however, something very different comes to mind. Schechtman’s concept of “empathic access” appears capable of determining the continuity in the three disparate phases of K’s life—the servile LAPD Officer KD6-3.7, the wanted and loved real boy Joe, and the-son-who-could-have-been K. Schechtman

in her essay on empathic access extensively refers to Richard Wollheim and Raymond Martin. In looking for continuity of personal identity, Wollheim looks backwards whereas Martin looks forward. For Schechtman:

Empathic access involves a situation where the original psychological make-up is, in an important sense, still present in the later, psychologically-altered person. The earlier beliefs, values and desires are recognized as legitimate and are given, so to speak, a vote in personal decision making. (“Empathic Access” 102)

She also adopts from Wollheim the idea that the right variant of reminiscence must be, at least partially, “iconic” in nature and must be “a centered memory”, i.e., “it is remembered from a point of view that is represented within the memory itself”, so that the one reminiscing accurately enconces the feelings, emotions, and thoughts of the person being remembered (“Empathic Access” 103). Moreover, she borrows from Martin the supplementary requirement of a predominantly sympathetic, essentially non-hostile, attitude towards those very feelings, emotions, and thoughts. This unique unison of “centered event memory with sympathy” is the basic constitution of what she addresses as empathic access (“Empathic Access” 108).

What gives K continuity of personal identity is, thus, his ability to sympathize with his past selves. Unlike Quaid, K does not outrightly behave contumeliously towards his past thoughts and actions. It is his empathic access to his memories and experiences that instil in him the penchant to help Deckard in reuniting him with his daughter. The concept of empathic access is found to be inapplicable in the case of *Total Recall* since Quaid views his past as distasteful and tries his best to distance himself from it. Ergo, proving that continuity of personal identity is maintained in the case of Quaid emerges as being more difficult than that in the case of K. Quaid becomes a person in his own right but to prove the continuity of his personal identity, a new theorization would be required altogether. Thus, despite all the apparent similarities, the two films prove to be starkly dissimilar in that one of the two has a protagonist afflicted with an identity-destroying psychological discontinuity. Nevertheless, one clause that stands substantiated is that both of them are as real as can be, in view of the fact that Ana rightly says “Anything real should be a mess” (*Runner* 01:19:58-01:20:00).

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