

Memory and identity in Total Recall and The Buried Giant

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Abstract: *As he is being injected for his memory implants he discovers he is a super-spy, his memories having been erased, that his wife Lori is also a spy but an evil one set to keep an eye on him by UFB Chancellor Vilos Coahaagen. And so, as they no doubt say in the publicity material somewhere, a journey for one man to discover the truth and fight for justice begins. Total Recall is thus about how your memory constitutes your identity and reversing memories can in turn change who you are and your purpose and mission in life. Quaid emerges from a soulless factory worker to a fighter for the right of the oppressed colony workers rights as a double agent. A lack of a past constitutes the lack of a shared identity and shared resolve to forgive and move on. Hence the amnesia between Axl and Beatrice also lends to a lack of depth in their relationship. The end of the novel suggests their separation as all the previous couples which the boatman had brought to the island had separated, and it makes the memory of their naïve simple and childlike love all the more poignant.*

Keywords: *Memory, Identity, Loss, Amnesia, Unstable*

Total Recall is an intense tale of on man's quest to uncover the truth of his identity and past. In a vastly overcrowded, class segregated future, everyman Douglas Quaid is haunted by dreams of being a secret agent

on the run. Convinced that these are repressed fantasies brought on by his monotonous life assembling security automations (which are like Cyber Stormtroopers) Quaid visits this place called "Rekall"; Rekall claims to implant fake but realistic fantasies into one's mind. So he gets a fantasy of being a double agent implanted. Suddenly, it is discovered that he already has memories of being an agent: meaning he actually is an agent with his memory erased. A swat team busts in for some reason and he dispatches them to some beautiful camera camera pans. Quaid's wife turning out to be a psychopathic killer, his past a complete sham and his grip on that fine line between reality and fantasy slowly slipping. In the background lies a dastardly plot by a rich chancellor involving the poor dissidents of the overcrowded Colony and the leader of an underground resistance.

Both this film, and the 1990 original are based on a classic 1966 short story "We Can Remember it for You Wholesale" by science fiction legend Philip K. Dick, whose work also inspired Blade Runner. The movie takes place at the other end of this century when the air has become so polluted that most of the earth is uninhabitable. Only two areas of the earth are able to sustain human life, one is Western Europe, now called The United Federation of Britain. The other is the former Australia, now simply called The Colony. People get from one area to the other via a vertical subway train that moves through the earth.

A soulless government runs the UFB, which has packed so many people into Western Europe that it has become dangerously overdeveloped and overpopulated. There is no longer a sense of architecture, only buildings that seem to be built without a plan. Located within The Colony is a resistance movement bent on overthrowing the oppressive government. The leader of the UFB, a bull-head politician named Coahaagan (Bryan Cranston), is developing a plan to squash the resistance with his robotic invasion force. We see this conflict mostly in brief glimpses on television screens. We hear about it, but never get involved in it.

Within the forbidding landscape of the UFB is Douglas Quaid (Colin Ferrell), a genial good-egg who is married to a beautiful wife (Kate Beckinsale) and works as a construction worker, building Coahaagan's security droids. He is plagued by the fact that his life seems to have no meaning, no purpose, no excitement. That's why an advertisement for a place called Rekall peaks his interest.

Rekall allows its clients the experience of having memories implanted in their brains that will make their wildest fantasies come true. Against the advice of his best buddy Harry (Bokeem Woodbine), Doug goes to Rekall. Strapped to a chair and about to be put under, it is suddenly revealed that he isn't who he thinks he is. His memory has been replaced by another. His whole life as he knows it is a lie, even his seven year marriage.

Instead of going to Mars, where a stranglehold on a precious mined mineral makes Coahaagan create a tyrannical rule over the inhabitants of that planet by

rationing air, the deal here never leaves Earth. We are supposed to believe that some chemical war wiped out pretty much every country on the planet except for Britain and the continent of Australia are The Coahaagen in this movie (played by Bryan Cranston) wants to take over what's left of the livable space by doing some major housecleaning of the existing population of "the colony" (Australia) because things have gotten packed pretty tight in Britain. There's a whole lot of gunfire throughout this flick and things getting blown to hell and those bits seem to serve the purpose of covering up the severe lack of interesting plot.

At the end of a 21st century a global war devastates the earth, leaving much of it uninhabitable. But, not to worry, for some strange reason both the UK and Australia are unaffected.

Most of the jobs and economic wealth are in the UK or "The United Federation of Britain - UFB). This means those poor people from The Colony - must travel to the UK each day to mindless and dangerous jobs working in factories making robot policemen that the UK then uses to suppress Australians further.

One of those working stiff is Douglas Quaid (Colin Farrell). He has to travel from Australia to the UK every day on a device known as the the Fall", a "gravity elevator", which travels through the Earth's core between Australia and the UK - very quickly. Sadly, "The Fall" (not to be confused with a rather interesting British indie band) seems to have little purpose but to set things up for a rather standard action sequence in the third act. Handy that.

Not surprisingly, Quaid is rather bored of this commutator run everyday, his equally boring job and one assumes his economic suppression by those evil Brits (who oddly are all American and speak with American accents - as do all of the Australians). So he visits an outfit called Rekall, a company that implants artificial memories. Its owner tells him that he can implant any memory he wants and whatever memory is implanted Quaid will believe he has had and experienced. Now he will have some happy memories while taking that commutator ride every day and screwing robots together that are at the same time part of the cause of his economic repression.

Quaid wants to remember being a spy. Not any old spy mind, but a double agent super spy - as you do. Easy, says Rekall and they make it so - or do they? As he is being injected for his memory implants he discovers he is a super-spy, his memories having been erased, that his wife Lori (Kate Beckinsale) is also a spy but an evil one set to keep an eye on him by UFB Chancellor Vilos Cohaagen . And so, as they no doubt say in the publicity material somewhere, a journey for one man to discover the truth and fight for justice begins. Total Recall is thus about how your memory constitutes your identity and reversing memories can in turn change who you are and your purpose and mission in life. As Nathaniel Rich¹ puts it, the answer is ambiguous. To forget everything is to lose your identity; to remember everything is to lose the ability to forgive. Memories are valuable. They are

what contributes to our identity. Our perception of our experiences in the past contributes to who we are today. To lose your memory is to lose your identity, and Total Recall shows changing a person's memory can change a person's identity. Quaid emerges from a soulless factory worker to a fighter for the right of the oppressed colony workers' rights as a double agent.

The Buried Giant's two elderly protagonists, Beatrice and Axl, are on a quest to a nearby village to look for their long-lost son. The background to their journey is a mythic Old England in which invading Saxons, having fought viciously with Britons, have since settled into an uneasy peace based on collective forgetfulness – an amnesia that manifests, literally, as a mist (spread by the breath of a she-dragon, Querig) and robs the country, and Axl and Beatrice, of their memories of the love they share between them, .

On the way the characters encounter many characters: the elderly couple, a courageous Saxon warrior, a boy who becomes the warrior's apprentice and, most unenduring of all, a geriatric Gawain (the legendary Arthurian knight) who initially appears in woodland wilderness, with aching limbs and an ancient horse.

The “mist” that obscures the memories of Axl and Beatrice is no symbol. It is in fact the breath of a she-dragon named Querig; her breath, thanks to a spell cast by Merlin, causes amnesia. Nearly everyone in the mist-shrouded valley is afflicted, apart from a Saxon warrior named Wistan, who is inexplicably immune. Axl and Beatrice become convinced that they have a son living in some distant village, and they

¹Rich, Nathaniel. *The Book of Sorrow and Forgetting*. The Atlantic. 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/the-book-of-sorrow-and-forgetting/384968/>

decide to reunite with him. Wistan, for no immediately obvious reason, volunteers to escort them on their expedition. Completing their troupe is an addled young boy, Edwin, who is seeking his mother, also long missing. As the four tramp up a rough mountain road, past forests and vales and waterfalls, they encounter supernatural beasts and, among other travelers, Sir Gawain himself.

Eventually the buried giant is exposed. We learn that during the great battle between the Britons and the Saxons, Axl served King Arthur as a statesman. His greatest achievement was a treaty that ordered the Britons to spare Saxon women and children, but as the war grew, the Britons violated the treaty, massacring entire villages. To avoid reprisals, Merlin cast his spell on the she-dragon, causing all the war's survivors, Saxon and Briton alike, to forget that the genocide had ever occurred. But Wistan, who managed to escape the slaughter and grew up among the Britons, appears to have been spared by the mist. He sets out to kill the dragon, and afterward lead the Saxons to avenge their defeat. In this he is opposed by Gawain, who has taken it upon himself to defend the dragon and the country's peace.

Also emerging is a forgotten personal dispute between Axl and Beatrice. Why the couple should begin to remember their past as they get closer to Querig, the source of their amnesia, is unclear, but the dawning awareness of past dishonesty forms a neat parallel with the reemergence of the Saxon-Briton conflict. Hence, might forgetting past horrors be a cure to love? Why awaken the giant from its slumber to remember past horrors which might damage their relationship?

As Nathaniel Rich² puts it, the answer is ambiguous. To forget everything is to lose your identity; to remember everything is to lose the ability to forgive.

The elderly couple are Axl and Beatrice — “Perhaps these were not their exact or full names, but for ease, this is how we will refer to them” (Ishiguro, 2015: 4)— who start out living in a hill-warren village, ill treated by their fellow Britons. Axl and Beatrice love each other deeply and care for each other as best they can. Beatrice has a malady, a pain in her side she insists is nothing serious, for which she seeks a cure. They have reached the age when their memories have become faded, when names, faces and even events disappear. But the problems with memory and event are not just theirs; all the people in their community, and even those in neighboring villages, Briton and Saxon, appear to be having the same difficulties. There is a mist that takes memories: good memories and bad, lost children, old hurts and difficult memories. Memories are valuable. They are what contributes to our identity.

As Beatrice says: “If that’s how you’ve remembered it, Axl, let it be the way it was. With this mist upon us, any memory’s a precious thing and we’d best hold tight to it.” (Ishiguro, 2015: 85)

Out of the fog of memory, Beatrice recollects that they have a grown son they’ve been neglecting in a nearby village, and that they need to see him. The couple set

²Rich, Nathaniel. *The Book of Sorrow and Forgetting*. The Atlantic. 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/the-book-of-sorrow-and-forgetting/384968/>

off on their journey, and soon encounter Wistan (a Saxon warrior whose first appearance immediately puts us in mind of Beowulf), who has rescued a boy stolen by ogres. Seeing Wistan, Axl begins to remember his own past, as someone who was, perhaps, also, in his day, a soldier of some kind. The rescued boy, Edwin, bitten by a monster, is in danger in his Saxon settlement, and the boy and the warrior join the elderly couple on their journey to the son's village.

Axl and Beatrice, gentle and caring and benevolent, wish only to live, to reach their son, to be together. They need to remember their past, but they are afraid of what those memories might entail.

Thus in the novel is a philosophical problem³ according to Neil Gaiman, expressed first by an old woman whose husband has gone on before her, crossing the bar, as it were, to a mystical island to which she has not been allowed. Only those couples who can prove to the boatman that their love is perfect and true, without bitterness or jealousy or shame, can cross the water together, in the same boat. She went on speaking, about how this land had become cursed with a mist of forgetfulness," Beatrice tells us of this woman. "And then she asked me: 'How will you and your husband prove your love for each other when you can't remember the past you've shared?' And I've been thinking about it ever since. Sometimes I think of it and it makes me so afraid." (Ishiguro, 2015: 49)

³ Gaiman, Neil. *Kazuo Ishiguro's The Buried Giant*. New York Times. 2015. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/books/review/kazuo-ishiguro-the-buried-giant.html?_r=0

The source of the fog is the breath of a sleeping dragon named Querig. And we learn that Wistan is as determined to slay this beast as Gawain is to protect it. Here we are presented with the book's philosophical problem on memory and recollection. Is it better to forget the misdeeds of the past, or remember and confront them? Axl gets anxious of how Beatrice might react if she remembers who he once was. She in turn fears recalling youthful blunders that might cause a rift between them. To both of them, the thought of being separated by the boatman is too intimidating. Similarly, Gawain argues that the uneasy peace upon the land is only possible if no one remembers the brutalities Saxons and Britons once dealt each other. Without the mist of amnesia, would a new era of conflict begin?

Along the way, they meet Wistan, a Saxon warrior; Sir Gawain, an elderly knight and nephew of the late King Arthur; and other characters including a boatman.

Axl and Beatrice are gentle and loving with each other, and one of the reasons is that it's impossible to hold grudges or be bitter when they are incapable of forming and recalling memories according to Leyla Sanai.⁴ But they long to recover memories of shared times. The amnesia of their country folk similarly keeps

⁴ Sanai, Leyla. *The Buried Giant by Kazuo Ishiguro, book review: Don't fall for the fantasy: This novel is classic Ishiguro*. The Independent UK. 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-buried-giant-by-kazuo-ishiguro-book-review-dont-fall-for-the-fantasy-this-novel-is-classic-10076373.html>

the peace as it enables past battles to be forgotten.

Ishiguro's question is whether this kind of amnesia can be rationalized, or whether it is more fair for people to face up to the horror of past deeds, even if it means some will ruin their love for others because of it. Will Axl and Beatrice remain as loving if they were to remember the horrors of their past? Does it mean to forgive and stay together, they must forget to make their love simple naïve and childlike? Perhaps the only reason their love endures is because of their collective amnesia.

Axl and Beatrice long for a past with which they must reconcile; the warrior for justice, whatever this entails; Gawain has the unfinished business of slaying Querig, while the boy simply looks for his mother. Memories of the past are evasive and elusive. The journey's end will lead the couple to cross the water to an island, where they can only dwell together if they have an abiding love: an "abiding love that has endured the years". How will they prove their love for each other to the boatman if they can't remember their past? Increasingly, the couple come to fear both the damaging power of forgetting their shared past, and remembering its less ideal moments too. Their memory loss makes their love for each other less complex and spoiled. While they cannot remember the past, they also cannot remember the dark moments and sad moments of their past. The simple childlike love of their continual present, is changing as memories return, and could change as more memories do. Ishiguro's point here might be that people who do not remember their past cannot forgive each other even between two people in love. A lack of a shared past brings an

impasse between them and a lack of a reservoir of time or shared memory upon which they can base their relationship's strength or forgive past hurts and move on in order to strengthen their relationship. A lack of a past constitutes the lack of a shared identity and shared resolve to forgive and move on. Hence the amnesia between Axl and Beatrice also lends to a lack of depth in their relationship. The end of the novel suggests their separation as all the previous couples which the boatman had brought to the island had separated, and it makes the memory of their naïve simple and childlike love all the more poignant.

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