

I Am the Databank: Humanity as Archive in Three Dystopian Films

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Abstract: Archives, as repositories of information related to a person or community, can reveal much about a society's character. As repositories of select information, archives serve an important social function. Since the information they contain is 'worth knowing' they are enculturative. In dystopian societies exploitation of the people is often achieved by controlling information. What data is collected, how and where it is stored, how and by whom it is managed and disseminated, and how it is officially interpreted figures largely in issues of propaganda, censorship, and privacy. Our data can become so internalized into our collective consciousness that we often interpret ourselves as artifacts of information, such as when our body art (i.e. tattoos) tells our personal story. In fiction we push this concept to the point that the human body becomes a literal archive. In *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), and *The Final Cut* (2004) human beings are used as information repositories. Examining what information they preserve is as important as asking why their bodies become archives in their societies. The protagonists in these films attempt to manipulate the societal mechanisms that subjugate and dehumanize the citizenry by taking control of the data that is embedded in their own personhood. This act of rebellion not only serves a political function, but also becomes an act of personal transformation, a search for the nature of truth, and a re-examination of what it is that is 'worth knowing'. How the characters in these films are alternately damaged and empowered by being turned into human archives is examined in an effort to expose different epistemological models and ways of coping with identity.

Introduction

Archives, as repositories of information related to a person or community, can reveal much about a society's character. When people bother to assemble and preserve a collection of data, they consider such information worth remembering. Archives preserve both personal and cultural identity by remembering for us. We so define the archive as a shared memory that the Library of Congress' award-winning digital archive is called, *American Memory* (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>).

In dystopian societies, as in all societies, exploitation of people is achieved, in part, by controlling information. What data is collected, how and where it is stored, how and by whom it is managed, edited, and disseminated, and how it is officially interpreted figures largely in issues of propaganda, censorship, privacy, and identity. In this paper I examine the relationship between the human body as archive, memory as identity, and the historical record in three dystopian films, *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), and *The Final Cut* (2004).

You are what you read

F*ahrenheit 451* is François Truffaut's adaptation of Ray Bradbury's novel of the same name. It is the story of a totalitarian society where owning and reading books is illegal. The protagonist, Guy Montag, is a fireman. But in this world firemen do not extinguish fires, instead they hunt down and burn books. Books are a public threat because the opposing viewpoints they contain are thought to encourage diversity, which in turn is thought to encourage civil unrest.

Montag belongs to the professional elite. He earns a comfortable living and is in line for a promotion at work. He wears a uniform that demands deference, lives in a fashionable suburban house, and is married to a beautiful woman. But Montag's tidy, *Pleasant Valley Sunday* existence is crumbling about him. Much of this is revealed in his home life, where we see Montag and his wife engage in an endless stream of platitudinous chitchat that leaves Montag desperate for emotional intimacy and intellectual stimulation. Montag makes a critical connection between memory and identity when he asks his wife if she remembers when they first met. When she indifferently responds that she genuinely cannot, he realizes that they have been living only in the present, without a personal history. It doesn't take him long to understand that most of his society also exists without a sense of history.

As a reaction to the bleak conformism he sees about him Montag secretly reads some of the books he uncovers in the course of his duties. Eventually he is pained to realize that the relationship he is forming with these forbidden books is more emotionally satisfying than his associations with the people in his life. Hope comes when he learns of the book-people, an underground group of book-lovers who live in seclusion outside the city. He escapes his sterile world and runs away to join them. There he meets the peaceful residents, and learns that each has committed an entire book to memory. But these people do not just memorize a book, they *become* one. Abandoning their identities, they completely take on a new persona. "I'm Plato's *Republic*", one resident cheerily tells Montag, "Let me know when you want me to recite myself to you."

In the famous, final scene of the film we see the book-people living like medieval monks in edenic simplicity. And though their existence seems austere, through their shared purpose they provide Montag with a more meaningful sense of community than his supposed successful urban lifestyle ever did. It is here that Montag begins becoming Poe's, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. After he learns this book he must destroy it because the book-people are not librarians; instead they are a living rare book collection. Purists will point out the differences between a special collection and an archive; but like any well-run archive, the book-people are a repository of information held in trust for future generations. In *Fahrenheit 451* the message is that you are what you *read*, and that you can only read what is available to you. To live without one's own recorded history, and the memory of past ages, with the accompanying contradiction and complexity, is to live a barren existence.

You are your possessions

This theme of memory as identity is explored on a more personal level in *Johnny Mnemonic*, a film adaptation of the William Gibson short story. In the film Johnny, an elite courier, smuggles sensitive information stored in an implant in his brain. As a walking flash-drive he contracts himself out to anyone who will pay, and since he lives in a world dominated by large corporations, many of his clients are top executives and gangsters. As often happens in dark stories of this kind, it is often hard to tell the difference between the executives and the gangsters. Johnny earns big bucks, wears impeccably tailored suits, and lives in swanky hotels populated by beautiful, blasé prostitutes. This life doesn't seem too shabby until one realizes that he has no friends, no home, and no family.

The price he's paid for his swish lifestyle is dear. To make room for the implant that makes him so much money, some of his brain tissue has been compromised and his childhood memories have been corrupted. Throughout the film he is taunted by blurry flashbacks of a half-remembered childhood birthday party and the tenuous presence of a faceless mother-figure. At the beginning of the film he has already realized that something is missing in his life. So he wants his memories back. He wants the implant removed. This requires an expensive operation and so Johnny agrees to one last, lucrative job to earn the money that will make him whole again.

Johnny's new clients have him carry the only surviving copy of the cure to a disease that is devastating the planet. But a pharmaceutical multinational plans to suppress the cure to manipulate the drug market. So they send out assassins to intercept Johnny and destroy him along with his implant. Johnny does find help from a band of rebels who successfully deactivate his implant and upload the precious medical data. Johnny gets his childhood memories back and it is not until he can remember the face of his mother that he smiles in the film. Clearly, without his childhood memories he not only felt incomplete, but desperately unhappy.

Johnny's body supports two distinct and disparate archives. This film presents a juxtaposition between the value of Johnny's human childhood memories and the collective, machine-memory he holds in his implant. While his childhood memories are priceless to him alone, the medical data stored in his implant has a high market value. Johnny starts out willing to not only mutilate his body, but also his personal history in the pursuit of the almighty dollar. Hence his *initial* belief, and the mantra of all good capitalists, is that you are what you *own*. It's worth noting that becoming an archive objectifies both Johnny and Montag. However, this process presents contrary outcomes for each character. In *Johnny Mnemonic*, Johnny triumphs because he reclaims his memories and identity by ceasing to be an information-storing thing. In contrast, by the end of *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag becomes heroic by sacrificing his personal identity to become a thing called a book written by Edgar Allen Poe.

You are your guilt

Issues of personal identity, memory and the public record are dealt with on a more complex plain in Omar Naim's film, *The Final Cut*. In this dystopia people elect to have their unborn babies implanted with a Zoe Implant, which records every moment of the person's life. After death, the implant is entrusted to professionals called "cutters" who condense the person's lifetime recorded memory into a one to two hour long film meant to be shown at their funeral service. The showing of this film is called a "rememory" and the cutter's job is to edit the summation of a person's life into a politically correct and atheistically pleasing sound bite. Material the cutter does not use is destroyed. Since they have complete access to sensitive, uncensored data, such as any crimes committed by or *witnessed* by the deceased, cutters must live by a strict code of conduct. Like father confessors or therapists they must never divulge or act upon any information they learn from creating rememory files. And since the Zoe Implant ruthlessly and relentless records everything a person sees, hears, and does, cutters cannot be implanted themselves.

Affluent families seek out the best cutters to help create the most flattering family image possible. The protagonist in this film, Alan Hackman, is a cutter who has built a strong reputation for sanitizing the lives of the rich and famous. Although it takes a special type of person to be a cutter, one who can disassociate from the sometimes horrific things witnessed in other people's lives, Hackman has earned the distinction of being able to handle clients who have been particularly nasty.

In spite of his professional success, Hackman is haunted by a childhood memory of accidentally causing the death of another boy. This unhappy man's trauma is *his* secret shame and because of it, he has devoted himself to hiding the shame of others. As noted in the film he, like all cutters, is a "sin-eater". But Hackman's life takes a bizarre turn when he edits the life of a prominent, well-respected doctor. As he views moments of the doctor's life on a computer monitor, he sees an acquaintance of the doctor's who looks just like the boy he thought he had killed many years ago. After some days of investigation, he learns that this man *is* the same person and he realizes that his memory has betrayed him. The boy he *thought* he killed has grown to adulthood. Since so much of his personality has been molded on this mistaken childhood memory, he is compelled to find the man in person.

Hackman breaks the cutter's code and conducts illegal searches through classified material. As he does so he serendipitously discovers in the archive of a company file that he had been the recipient of a Zoe Implant, but that his now-deceased parents never informed him of this critical fact. Upon learning that every intimate detail of his life is being recorded Hackman arranges to have his implant illegally scanned so that he can 'go back in time' to learn exactly what happened in his childhood.

As in *Johnny Mnemonic*, Hackman represents two archives existing in one person. But unlike Johnny, Hackman is presented with a unique opportunity; he can compare his subjective, human memory to the objectivity of his Zoe Implant. After his scan, which almost claims his life, he learns that as a boy he had overreacted and ran away, thinking

he had killed someone who was just knocked unconscious. And so Hackman *is not* the murderer he thought he was. So while Johnny's implant poses a threat to his memories and the preservation of his identity, Hackman's implant is the source of his salvation, because it offers him a reliable alternate to a distorted and damaging childhood memory. As in *Fahrenheit 451* and *Johnny Mnemonic*, Hackman learns that memory shapes identity, but he learns late in life that memory can be edited, not only by the cutter's computer, but also by our own sense of guilt and shame.

Society as the body

Montag, Johnny, and Hackman are professional men who have a secure place in their societies. But all are missing the memory that they need to form a healthy personal identity. Because the body politic is so closely linked to the human body in these films, the common dystopian theme of the hero defeating the rotten regime becomes an intimate act of physical deprivation, alteration, and mutilation. Montag becomes an ascetic, while Johnny and Hackman deal with their own anatomy and the recording devices stuck inside their heads. These protagonists expose the weaknesses in their societies by dealing with the data that is embedded, or becomes embedded in their flesh. Each film serves up a moral lesson: from Montag we learn that diversity of opinion is to be valued and that we must preserve our cultural heritage; Johnny shows us that money alone cannot buy happiness; and Hackman teaches us that sin cannot be *eaten* by another, rather it must be dealt with.

People as archives

Thinking of people as archives can be a useful exercise. Although many would agree that we shape our archives and, in turn, our archives shape us, some take for granted that what is important and valuable will be collected and preserved. But what does "important" mean, and who gets to decide what is "valuable?" How much do we, like Hackman, unconsciously edit our own memory, and how does this affect how we handle the so-called ephemera of our culture? What do we cherish and save? Do we value data as Johnny does, because someone places a high price tag on it? Do we reject the voice of social deviants like Montag, because we fear opposing viewpoints? Or do we reject what we don't understand because we haven't been allowed a comprehensive education?

How sobering it was for us to discover in 1906 that *an alternate text* of Archimedes' *Method of Mechanical Theorems*, had been unintentionally preserved because it was sewn into the leaves of a medieval prayer book (<http://www.archimedespalimpsest.org/>). The *Archimedean Palimpsest* is a medieval manuscript written on parchment that had been previously used for the writings of other books, one of these being a book containing at least seven treatises by Archimedes. Because of advances in multispectral

imaging we can read the writing of the prayer book as well as the Archimedean text. To us this mathematical jewel is priceless, but was obviously disposable to at least one medieval mind. For me, it's too easy to vilify the thirteenth century monk who patiently scratched the Archimedean calculations from the sheets of vellum to reuse as a prayer book. I see the prayer book as historically significant and beautiful as the Archimedean formulae. But I do wonder how much we are like that medieval scribe. People choose to destroy artifacts of information because of ideology, expense, convenience, aestheticism, and neglect. But we preserve information artifacts for the very same reasons; the differences are more about our viewpoint than some universal right of authority. What are we deleting from the historical record because of the data we unconsciously hold inside ourselves? If each of us can be a type of archive, how does our personal and cultural identity influence the selection and de-selection of the stuff that defines us? And will we be able to distance ourselves enough from this material to make wise choices of what we will preserve for the future?

Introduction to films clips

You may be expecting to see clips from all three films, but although useful to my analysis, I rate *Johnny Mnemonic* as a good short story turned into a substandard film, so I won't inflict it upon you. I'll concentrate instead on the other two films.

Clip I

In this first clip from *Fahrenheit 451*, we see the beginning of Montag's transformation into an archive. Montag, played by Austrian actor Oskar Werner, arrives in the book-people's community wearing his black fireman's uniform. He is met by a community leader who introduces himself as *The Journal of Henri Brulard*. Brulard tells him that he is expected, and shows him how the mainstream propaganda machine is dealing with his defection on television. Montag see the authorities kill him on television. If you look carefully you can see, in the television broadcast, a bit of the mechanized, poured-concrete world that Montag comes from. Compare that to the rural world he has now entered. Although the person playing Montag in the news broadcast is an actor hired by the state, this is Montag's ritualistic death made more evident by Brulard's offering him a new garment and advising him to "shed his old skin". Later in the film, Montag's rebirthing will turn him into a book written by Edgar Allen Poe.

Clip II

In this second clip from *The Final Cut*, we see Hackman, played by Robin Williams, at the end of a rememory service of a prominent doctor. (Hackman has not yet learned that he has been implanted with a Zoe Chip.) Attendants at the service have just finished watching the rememory film that Hackman has cut of the deceased doctor's life. As

people file out of the theater to the outside patio, Hackman is annoyed by a former associate who has quit the profession because he has come to feel that the Zoe Chip is unethical. Hackman then experiences a flashback to his childhood memory of causing the death of another boy, which is the defining moment of his life. Hackman's burden of witnessing other people's intimate moments is demonstrated outside on the patio, but it is brief and you have to watch for it: As Hackman looks at a woman consoling the deceased doctor's widow, he has a momentary flashback of this same woman having sex with the doctor. The woman and Hackman share a brief glance — hers tinged with adulterous guilt and Hackman's with the weariness of the sin-eater. Picketing the funeral are protestors of the anti-Zoe counterculture. Many of these people have elaborate tattoos made up of magnetized ink that disrupts the implant of the wearer. As a cutter, Hackman is very unpopular with these people.

References

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