

# Memories of Future Masculine Identities: A Comparison of Philip K. Dick's "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale", the 1990 Film *Total Recall* and its 2012 Remake

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## Imagined memories of masculine identities

But what I've really done is, I have atavised [my characters'] society. That although it's set in the future, in many ways they're living—there is a retrogressive quality in their lives, you know? They're living like our ancestors did. I mean, the hardware is in the future, the scenery's in the future, but the situations are really from the past. (Philip K. Dick quoted in Spivard 1990: i)

Memory as a process of identity construction is at the heart of the three texts I discuss in this paper: Philip K. Dick's short story "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale", published in 1966, but written in the 1950s; the 1990 film *Total Recall* directed by Paul Verhoeven; and Len Wiseman's 2012 version of the latter by the same titled. In each of these three texts, a man struggles to remember who he was, as he discovers that his present identity has been artificially implanted in his brain, after all previous memories of his true self were erased. However, the three texts do not rely on memory as the only mechanism of self-construction. Indeed, fantasy and desire emerge as the first strategies

of self-building. The 'new' past that is being revealed is, in fact, identical to the fantastic visions that had been animating the main character's dreams for as long as he can remember. The future of self-projection and the alternative presents of fantasy aptly precede the past of memories in these sci-fi narratives. In their fictional 'cosmoi', identity is the result of a combination of unconscious desire, obsessive and ever-present yearnings, submerged memories, conscious recollection and self-narration. Identity is thus relying on three fundamental channels for its development: memory as continual existence, fantasy as propelling desire, and consciousness as self-narrative. Each of these represent the way in which the self understands and elaborates on, respectively, the past, future and present versions of the self.

At first sight, it would appear that all three texts in question revolve around an idea of memory based on Andy Clark's and David Chalmers's theory of the extended mind (1998). Technology operates both within and without the main character's mind, affecting and shaping internal and external 'realities' alike, so that there is no clear demarcation between the dimensions of the tangible and of the psyche. Furthermore, the fact that all three texts consistently elude a definite version of reality is reminiscent of postcolonial understandings of memory as an imagined territory, to draw upon Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* (2010). In this sense, to recall is to reinvent the past according to desire-driven configurations. Nevertheless, both Dick's short story and the two *Total Recall* films resist and defy attempts to define memory, fantasy and self-narrative except in relation to one another. A working definition of their relationship could be phrased as follows: memory is a discursive account of the past self which results from the often conflictual interaction of external (alien) and internal (self-generated) narratives of the self. In other words, memory, as we shall see later on, is compound of and identical to the various 'stories' that are told about the past self by the present self, as well as by other characters. Whether these 'stories', or narratives of the self, are true or not—and to what extent they are—cannot be fathomed. Ultimately, these narratives of the self are all

fictional in 'potentia'. The fact that some of them coincide with the self's wildest fantasies contributes to blur the boundaries between reality and desire.

Since Verhoeven's *Total Recall* is an adaptation of Dick's story for the silver screen, and Wiseman's film is, in turn, a remake of Verhoeven's, memory is here fundamental not only in the process of *intra*-textual self-narration, but also in the process of *inter*-textual reconstruction of the narrative itself. From a postmodernist point of view, the latter process is negotiated through the ongoing dialogue established with the text by the writer-reader binomial. Spectators' memories of an earlier version of a given text ultimately influence each successive interpretative act. What is more, to re-produce the original text in a different form is a creative act in itself, even more so if the result is radically different as far as the intentional expression of meaning is concerned (Palmer 2007: 3-7). Hollywood's current tendency to resort to remakes<sup>1</sup> could be seen as a mere attempt to capitalise on formats that have already proven to be commercially successful. However, to analyse those remakes from the perspective of gender studies is to take into consideration how ideals of masculinity and femininity have evolved through past socio-cultural contexts and into the present one. It would then be interesting to investigate the extent to which futuristic scenarios of technological progress become but a backdrop to cultural evolution. If this were so, Hollywood remakes would be playing past anxieties against future potentiality in an attempt to soothe current individual and collective identitary crises.

In "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale" and both *Total Recall* films, the 'construction' of memory is as technological and fabricated as it is organic and unconscious. Indeed, technology, like memory, supplies the basis for the existence not only of each individual plot, but also of each of the successive versions of the plot. Technological progress triggers the events described in each of the three plots, but it also mobilizes the very process of textual adaptation to the cinematic

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<sup>1</sup> From *The War of the Worlds* to *I am Legend*, there are many instances of classic sci-fi films re-made by the mainstream film industry.

medium. The technological manipulation of memory, consciousness and desire – and thus of personal identity – is, as we have seen, the rail along which runs the main plotline of all three texts in question<sup>2</sup>. The centrality of technology within the narrative cosmos of Dick's story provides a powerful motivation to turn a literary work of fiction into an audio-visual text and to bring the latter into the late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century with an array of high-tech designs and effects. On the one hand, a science fiction text is particularly suitable to flaunt the latest special effects and thus market its on-screen version as one of Hollywood's mega-productions. On the other hand, in "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale", Dick provides the reader with the means to initiate and develop a complex discussion about the ultimate fulfilment of manhood. This idea is traditionally at the heart of action films and, in fact, the specific format used by both cinematic adaptations of Dick's story stretches science fiction themes over an action film plot. This merging of science fiction and action is not unusual in itself, but it certainly acquires greater relevance when it comes to re-mediating a narrative of the gendered self in general and of the hero in particular. Dick's tale speaks of the resurrection of a masculinity in crisis and, as Yvonne Tasker (1993) and Paul Watson (2002) have argued, the 1980s and 1990s are a period of pervasive uncertainties, as far as gender identities are concerned. Wiseman's decision to re-make Verhoeven's *Total Recall* indicates a will to address the same themes in the same conventional form. In this sense, the fact

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<sup>2</sup> Memory loss and manipulation constitute recurrent thematic threads in science fiction narratives from the 1980s to the 2010s. Two outstanding examples of films revolving around the idea of memory engineering are *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995) and *Paycheck* (2003). In other science fiction films, such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Moon* (2009), memory may not be so crucial to the development of the plot, but it is still clearly central to the process of identity formation. Even non-sci-fi films of the period, like *The Bourne Identity* (2002) and *Memento* (2000), delve into the nature of memory as a fundamental means of self-construction.

that Dick's story only deploys technological paraphernalia 'within' the fictional cosmos of the story itself sets it apart from its two filmic versions in that the latter are also produced 'through' technological means. The transition from a verbal text to a visual one allows for a different form of gender representation, one with an 'in-your-face' effect that faithfully mirrors the physicality and spectacularity so akin to the action genre. Thus, technological progress and technological excess – the profusion of gadgets which Dick's original text conspicuously lacks – not only constitute the material and aesthetical dimensions of the two *Total Recall* films, that is, the 'form' that shapes the filmic text by resorting to a particular set of conventions and discursive strategies, but they also constitute the 'thematic' framework within which narrativity is woven.

In Dick's, as well as in Verhoeven's and Wiseman's texts, all identity dimensions – class, ethnicity, sexuality, race, age – are configured via the triangle memory-fantasy-consciousness mentioned above. However, I shall concentrate on gender in particular because I believe its construction catalyses the process of identity formation as a whole in the texts in question. Specifically, I shall analyse these narratives as quintessential examples of three, quite different, paradigms of masculinity in crisis (Connell 2005; Kimmel 1996; Watson 2002). Dick's "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale" is concerned with the shifting landscapes of post-atomic culture (Holliday 2006). Verhoeven's *Total Recall*, is precariously poised in-between postcoloniality and fin-de-siècle anxieties. The third text in question, Wiseman's *Total Recall*, was gestated in the post-9/11 era of globalised uncertainties. Both the films and the short story can be said to offer an intrinsically ambiguous interpretation of the reliability of the focaliser. In other words, it is impossible to tell whether the events in the plotline are just an artificially implanted memory fulfilling a desire, or else, the suddenly resurfacing memories of an old heroic self are real, as the focaliser seems to believe. However, I am not interested as much in the inextricable coexistence of paranoia and reality as I am in the nature of the ultimate fantasy with which each text climaxes and ends. Individual ideals of gender roles and gender identities are always

intimately connected to gender constructions in specific socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, an analysis of the way in which the said fantasies are configured in the texts will in fact denounce which collective ideal of masculinity is at the centre of each narrative discourse. In other words, the differences in the representation of masculinity from novel to film and from film to film can be read as a reflection of the changes implemented in the socio-cultural context in which the said texts were produced.

Each instalment of a sequential text – for example, each of the six episodes of the *Star Wars* saga – is related to the others in terms of the plot, as well as aesthetically and conceptually. A remake – or a new version of a text, as is the case here – may constitute an indirect or improper type of sequential text, but it will undoubtedly establish a fruitful dialogue with the previous text(s). In particular, it will (re)present a masculinity whose differences from the original ones will be all the more conspicuous because of the similarities in the narrative fabric. One of the main points I would like to make is, in fact, that Dick's "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale" and both *Total Recall* films create visions of future masculinity with the specific purpose of their being 'remembered' in the present. This is to say that, far from representing dystopian constructions of masculinity – and thus of portraying present anxieties from the safe distance of future worlds – these texts resurrect templates of masculinity that belong to the past both from the point of view of the main character *and* from the point of view of the spectator/reader. In all three cases, the masculinity 'remembered' is one that does indeed draw heavily upon the hegemonic manhood of patriarchal cultural discourses.

As we shall see later on, the diversification of the hegemonic discourse on gender has transformed traditional Masculinity into masculinities, particularly from the 1980s onwards. We could ask these texts which—possibly conflictive—masculinities they are portraying. Are there any subtexts that can be supporting the idea that more than one masculinity coexists in each of the three narrative 'cosmoi'? The second question to be addressed is whether women play no role at all in the construction of the masculine self in these three texts. Given the

oppositional definition of masculinity and femininity, this question can hardly be ignored. If we look at Dick's short story, the answer could be assumed to be yes, although not an uncomplicated yes, as we shall see later on. Things do certainly become even more complex when we look at the two *Total Recall* films. The castrating femininity in Dick's story is displaced, in the first *Total Recall*, by an apparently antagonistic femininity, which turns out to be but a sexual instrument of masculine aggression and dominion. Conversely, in the second *Total Recall*, it is replaced by the figure of the female usurper of masculine roles.

### **Returning centrality to the holistic Self: Philip K. Dick's "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale"**

As I have already mentioned, the premise is the same for all three texts under scrutiny here. A frustrated man's tedious life is troubled by an irrepressible desire to step out of his character, his insufferably flat routines, and a castrating marriage. Douglas Quail, renamed Quaid in both films, secretly applies to have fake memories of a trip to Mars installed in his brain, only to discover that he has actually been on an expedition to Mars, and that any conscious memories of this trip as a secret agent have been surgically removed from his mind. Quail/Quaid has been, or rather, already is he who he longs to be: the adventurous, powerful, invincible embodiment of archetypal masculinity. The narrative of a past self is found to be identical to the hero's dreams as they are presented in the narrative of his present self. Both narratives, that of the present self and that of the past self, become means of self-identification for Quail/Quaid. Memory, consciousness and identity thus merge with fantasy, which, in turn, blossoms into an unexpected, larger-than-life reality. Unsatisfied masculinities are provided with an 'anagnorisis' which bestows the much desired gift of a glorious, heroic identity on the three protagonists. In all three texts, the framework for the narrative development is thus that of living out the ultimate fantasy. In each text, such fantasy is constructed as a combination of the fact of being the ultimate alpha-male in terms of agency, and of

eventually taking over strategic and political power as well. In both the films and the short story, the first phase of the fantasy sees masculine subjects dream of being the strongest, most able, quickest and smartest of all secret agents – the James Bond fantasy – and thus of being effectively one of the most important people on earth. Memory, in this first phase, is conceived as a technological construct, the product of science applied to the refurbishing of the human being. It follows that the activities carried out at Rekal Incorporated can be considered as the product of a new ‘techné’: the art of identity-making. Memory is a tool – as artificial and manmade as a spade or a microchip, which is used, be it willingly or unwillingly, to re-fashion identity.

However, in Dick’s version, the second phase finds Quail remembering that he actually *is* the most important person on earth because of the deal an alien race had made with him not to invade the planet as long as he lived, so that «by merely existing, [...] [Quail] keep[s] the Earth safe from alien rule» (Dick 1997: 320). After recovering his memory and discovering that he really used to be a lethal assassin trained by the government, Quail is about to be put to death because what he once did and now remembers again was «not in accord with [the government’s] great white all-protecting father public image» (*ibid.*: 316). He then manages to convince the government to erase his memory once more and to implant new artificial memories of a fake past identity. This past identity should this time be grandiose enough to prevent him from becoming “restless” again. In the words of the military psychiatrist who has been asked to determine Quail’s ultimate dream, the main character’s absolute fantasy is as follows.

[T]he creatures [...] are very small and helpless, [...] although they are attempting to invade Earth; tens of thousands of other ships will soon be on their way, when this advance party gives the go-ahead signal [...] You halt the invasion, but not by destroying them. Instead, you show them kindness and mercy, even though you know [...] why they have come. They have never seen such humane traits exhibited by any sentient organism, and to show their appreciation they make a covenant with you. (*Ibid.*: 319)



Quail inflates his self-image to become Christ-like in that through him humanity is spared, and, what is more, it is via his display of humanity that he recovers not only a holistic dimension of being, but also a godlike status. To quote the Interplan police officer whose job is to make sure Quail's ultimate fantasy is implanted in his brain as an "extra-factual" memory, this fantasy is both "grandiose" and «arrogant, [...] [i]nasmuch as when he dies the invasion will resume» (*ibid.*: 320). Quail's verbal articulation of his identity also replaces the sadomasochism of masculine heroism. The physical tortures that traditionally threaten and are applied to James Bond-like heroes do not even rise to the category of mental torture in this case. All we see is blissful unconsciousness followed by recollection and narration, which enables the sad little man that Quail seems to be at the beginning of the story to emerge as the unquestioned hero of human history at large. We could thus conclude that in Dick's story the male Subject returns to his place at the centre of the phallo-лого-centric discourse. Dick's Quail does not simply turn out to 'have' the phallus—which, incidentally, he is provided with by his all-male chorus of secondary characters—but also to 'be' the phallus (Holmlund 2008: 222), effectively displacing femininity as the gender which in Lacan's theory occupies the latter position. However, far from being feminised because of this, Quail ends up being construed as the ultimate masculine Subject, who is everything at the same time, who contains everything, centre and margin, and does not then require a complementary, although inferior opposite to justify and structure his superior, all-comprehensive existence. Indeed, once his castrating wife disappears<sup>3</sup>, Quail is free to

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<sup>3</sup> The theme of the missing wife is also central to the action and Western genres. Her absence usually ignites or is ancillary to the main plotline and reinforces the notion that the hero should be free from any constraints in order to carry out his mission. The extraordinary character of the latter reflects the exceptional character of the male hero himself, who operates beyond social conventions and is thus dispensed from the obligation to marry and play the role of 'pater familias'.

resume his role as he without whom mankind will be destroyed. Other than his wife, a nagging, physically and emotionally distant character whose role is that of bursting every single dream of his – «it is a wife’s job to bring her husband down to Earth» (Dick 1997: 305), literally in this case –, the only other female character is the secretary at Rekal Incorporated, who is presented as nothing more than a sexually attractive, as well as sexually available, subaltern. After his wife has left the apartment and the narrative, no other woman is ever mentioned again. Femininity exits stage for, as we have seen, it is no longer necessary in order to define masculinity by opposition. In fact, we could say that feminine characters are forgotten. Memory, as a process of identity construction, is concerned with one identity, and one identity only: that of the masculine hero.

What is more, memory, in Dick’s story, would initially seem to be the only true process of identity construction. Dreams and fantasies appear not to be enough to sustain the self: the “might be” and even the “will be” do not compare to the «*have been* and *have done*» Rekal Incorporated offers (*ibid.*: 308). However, “actual memory” is not enough to define identity, due to «its vagueness, omissions and ellipsis, not to say distortions» (*ibid.*). Oblivion, the constitutive restraint of ontological identity, is constantly threatening human existence. Personal memories, unless reinforced by external data, and re-woven into a cohesive narrative, are as ineffectual in terms of providing the subject with an identity, as collective memories become over time, unless structured along the narrative thread of history. Thus, artificially implanted memories must be resorted to in order to re-establish the missing links, to provide the necessary discursive coherence and to reintroduce those “details” (*ibid.*) that contribute to the sense of integrity of the self. This “extra-factual memory” (*ibid.*), as Dick dubs it, this artefact of recollection is thus easily comparable to history in that both are artificial means to carry out the same aforementioned functions. History provides the collective narrative in which personal narratives are inscribed. Consequently, the former must needs define the latter much in the same way socio-cultural circumstances define individual subjectivities. To quote Christopher

Palmer, history, as the human construction postmodernity takes it to be, is construed as “fragile and deceptive”, socially-woven narratives being as “fabricated or fake” as individual narratives (2007: 5-6). Moreover, memory can only reside in the conscious mind: it is useless, as far as the process of self-construction is concerned, if buried in the unconscious. In Dick’s story, the voyage into Quail’s mind begins ‘after’ he has woken up. Dreaming is a ‘conscious’ act for him: «[his] dream [grows] as he [becomes] fully conscious, the dream and the yearning» (Dick 1997: 305). Interestingly, it is the narcissism of the infant child that comes to the rescue of a masculine identity on the verge of dissolution. It does so by returning to it its lost “phantasies” (Neale 2008: 11)<sup>4</sup> of wholeness, self-containment, omnipotence and unconditional value. Thus, memory, fantasy and consciousness merge into a single, circular motion that creates and preserves identity in a process as holistic, complete and self-contained as the self it produces.

### **Loving man, beloved hero: Verhoeven’s *Total Recall***

Following Steve Neale’s critique of Mulvey’s analysis of male voyeurism and female spectacle in cinema (2008: 10-15), I propose a reading of the first *Total Recall* as informed by the constant oscillation between narcissistic identification and erotic voyeurism, both being primarily occupied with the male body and the masculine self. In other words, man’s physical and ontological dimensions are playing both the role of the observer and that of the observed. Thus, man is found at the centre of a scopophilic endeavour to construct his self ontologically through the act of gazing at him(self). I see, therefore I exist, and I exist in the very image of what is being seen; the act of seeing ‘produces’ what is seen, at the same time the viewer ‘becomes’ what s/he sees. It follows that Schwarzenegger’s muscular masculinity is under scrutiny both by the spectator and by the other characters, who just so happen

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<sup>4</sup> Like Steve Neale, I use the spelling ‘phantasy’ as a reference to Judith Butler’s understanding of the psychoanalytic notion of the ‘phantasmatic’ (1993: 188).

to be (mostly) male. He is perceived and constructed as a specimen, first, and thus objectified through the inquisitiveness of the voyeuristic gaze, and then he is turned into a spectacle through the eroticising effect of the fetishist gaze (*ibid.*: 16). The last image of the initial sequence in the film, the dream/memory of a walk on Mars hand in hand with an exoticised woman, leaves the spectator with a grotesque token of the fragility of the male body, once his metaphoric and literal armour are broken through. The next scene, however, focuses on the solidity of Schwarzenegger's bull-like neck and wide shoulders. His massive arms, strategically placed in the foreground along with his sweaty, palpitating pectorals, compete with, if not overshadow Sharon Stone's legs and revealing neckline. Although Schwarzenegger's character may not remember his past, the spectators do recall the plastic 'masculinity' of his body from several previous incarnations – i.e., *Conan the Barbarian* and *The Terminator*, to name but a few (Holmlund 2010).

In the 1990 version of *Total Recall*, the aftermath of the Vietnam War conditions a masculinity still in its Rambo-esque phase, obsessed, that is, with men's physical capability for accomplishing feats of bodily heroism. The white male crisis, already rooted in the 1950s, but particularly visible during the 1990s (Watson 2002: 15), stems from a growing awareness – in both academic and popular culture – of the existence of multiple masculinities that challenge the heterosexual white norm. The construction of masculinity as spectacle is thus, on the one hand, a means to counteract a pervasive sense of emasculation of the Western world. The irony so patent in Dick's choice of the surname "Quail" is lost in both *Total Recall* films, since Verhoeven's and Wiseman's decision to rename the protagonists of their films "Quaid" indicates their refusal to brand them as fragile, tiny preys to larger creatures. On the other hand, male physicality, both in bodily form and in the form of behavioural patterns, is showcased on screen with the specific purpose of bridging the gap between a rising rejection of traditional, patriarchal virility and the persisting demand for masculine models that are reassuringly clear, defined and definite. The proliferation, from the 1980s onwards, of male nudes (Tasker 2000), as

well as of the physical feats and visual acrobatics of male actors (King 2009: 91-116), signifies an attempt to both reassure the spectator of the permanence of hegemonic, heterosexual conceptions of masculinity, and to mirror the emergence of a plethora of masculinities that cross over one another as often as they diverge. The sequentiality of 1980s action films – the various *Rambo*, *Rocky*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Die Hard*, and *Terminator* franchises – was a rhetorical strategy through which traditional masculinity was «reproduced successfully in post-Vietnam, post-Civil Rights, and post-women’s movement’s era» (Jeffords 2008: 247).

Paradoxically, Verhoeven seems to delight in the mightiness of Schwarzenegger’s physique as much as he enjoys taking his body to the limit and breaking it. To see a life-sized reproduction of Schwarzenegger’s head grimace and swell to the point of exploding is to revel in the visual pleasures the film industry could offer back in 1990. Just as Schwarzenegger’s pumped-up limbs and torso signify an excessive sort of masculinity, the profusion of special effects – unnecessary from the point of view of the plotline – is there to convey a sense of the spectacular that is part and parcel with action and sci-fi genres alike. Excessive are the main characters, their ultimate fantasies and the genre that frames the narratives. The explosions, endless chases and choreographed fight scenes are all designed to underscore the kind of muscular, skilful, acrobatic masculinity they were seeking to portray. Visual technology makes Quaid’s feats possible, which, in turn, makes him a hero. Special effects become, thus, the vehicle of heroic masculinity by visualising the hero’s masterly use of his physical abilities – his strength, agility, speed and endurance of pain. Ironically, it is through the improvement of digital and visual technology that heroism is returned to its most physical incarnation.

In *Total Recall*, Schwarzenegger’s hyper-masculinity both entices and forbids the spectator from identifying with Douglas Quaid. His gender identity is both the consequence of spectacular actions and impeccable performance – whose materiality makes them come across as plausible, but impossible, at the same time – *and* the consequence of the imagined, the fantasised and the unreachable, which, again, turns

his heroism into an impossibility. In this sense, the continuum into which memory and fantasy merge in the filmic texts reaches out into the audience in that not only spectators will 'recall' Schwarzenegger's previous fictional identities, thus making Quaid's former identity as action hero ironically 'real', but they will also immediately acknowledge the impossibility of his 'merely' being Douglas Quaid, the dull construction site worker. This is also partly due to his obviously foreign accent. Hence, the necessity of renaming his previous identity Karl Hauser, a German-sounding name. This particular version of the main character's alter ego is not to be found in Dick's short story. Neither is Melina, the "sleezy *and* demure" product of Quaid's libido, nor the trip to Mars which Quaid takes after his visit to Rekal Incorporated.

This trip introduces the theme – so dear to U.S. cultural history – of armed resistance against an oppressive homeland. Since Quaid is meant to be working for 'both' sides of the war, the all-mighty hegemonic power and the smaller, though morally superior 'resistance', he plays both the role of Goliath and that of David. Logic expects the former to win, whereas narrativity wants the latter to succeed; Quaid overcomes this dichotomic thinking by playing both roles at once. He is invincible by virtue of his own essence and of the essence of the grand narrative he finds himself living out. In the scene in which he finally confronts his opponent, the 1990 version of Quaid is given a definition of identity consisting in one's actions, as opposed to one's memory/narration of the self. Considering how Quaid manages to be who he is by remembering who he is, and that he does so by acting out a pre-ordered memory/narration of his self, it follows that he is put in a win-win situation, where it does not matter whether his actions are mobilised by his desire or by his memories, or even whether his actions are being remembered or his memories are being re-enacted. In either case, he is, was and always will be the centre of the universe. In fact, at the end of the film, Quaid is represented as the creator of a new world, a godlike Adam who fathers his own Eden.

In one of the last scenes of the film, right after Quaid has managed to start the alien contraption that provides Mars with an atmosphere –

thus saving all its inhabitants – we see the marginalised populace of Venus Ville and the wealthy patrons of a luxury hotel come out of the artificial domes and walk under the blue skies of the red planet. This ‘brave new world’, which so closely resembles the 19<sup>th</sup> century frontier, will be populated by prostitutes, freaks, mine workers, clerks and businessmen in peaceful coexistence. All thanks to a white man who, even during the few weeks he worked at a construction site, still owned an impeccable flat, an exceptionally attractive wife and the means to go on holiday to exotic destinations. A man who used to belong to the same destructive power system that exploited the Martian colons in order to advance its war effort. Just by shifting the target of his violence from the ‘good’ guys to the ‘bad’ ones, this super-sized alpha-male justifies territorial colonisation and the murder of Dr. Edgemar, a terrified and unarmed man, as well as that of the woman with whom he had been romantically involved only a few days before. The ultimate masculine fantasy in 1990 consists in using the same traditional strategies of dominion which allows male subjects to get literally away with murder, and in being ‘loved’ for it<sup>5</sup>. Susan Jeffords contends that «[early 1990s] Hollywood male star/heroes have been constructed as more internalized versions of their historical counterparts [...] A self-effacing man, one who now, instead of learning to fight, learns to love» (2008: 245). Verhoeven’s *Total Recall* inverts this plotline, for Quaid is portrayed as an already loving husband who must remember how to fight. While in Dick’s story the self-contained masculine Subject does not need anyone to know of his greatness, since his is a self-satisfying, narcissistic identification, in Verhoeven’s film the marginal, the excluded – the Others, in short – must gather again in grateful awe around heroic manhood, their saviour and protector. Gender and class divisions are still most evident, but they have magically ceased to matter.

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<sup>5</sup> Here is, once again, a convention that is also at the core of action and Western films.

## **Guilty pleasures: Oedipal anxieties in Wiseman's *Total Recall***

In both *Total Recall* films, «the body of the hero, and not his voice, his capacity for making a rational argument, is the place of last resort», as Yvonne Tasker puts it (2008: 241). However, unlike Schwarzenegger's almost carefree rendition of Quaid, the protagonist of the 2012 *Total Recall* embodies a masculinity haunted by an ever-present sense of self-doubt and a past identity which 'expects' him to be strong, assertive, aggressive and in control. In the 2012 version, the ultimate fantasy is tinted with nightmarish hues through and through. It is not a dream, but a labyrinth of guilt the hero must exceed before seizing his idealised goal. Colin Farrell's perennial frown is that of a man terrified of his own power. Conversely, Verhoeven's playful approach to special effects and crude visual jokes sprinkles his discourse with a lightheartedness that tones down the political incorrectness of Quaid's rampant, conquering masculinity. In the 2012 *Total Recall*, technology, on the contrary, is a serious matter. In Wiseman's post-apocalyptic world, technological warfare has already destroyed the planet and split what is left of it into an irresolvable dichotomy. So irresolvable that the only channel that connected the two physical dimensions on which it was articulated – the United Federation of Britain and the Colony – is severed for ever at the end of the film. In the first *Total Recall*, technology is as ambiguous as the narrative itself. Machines can enslave, as the oxygen-producing windmills do in the Martian Colony, or free human kind, as the atmosphere-generating device does. On the contrary, nothing good comes of technological advances in Wiseman's film. Its final scene reveals a new world in which very little futuristic technology seems to have survived and where the hero's physical greatness is once more the only source of protection.

By 2012, the space expansionism of the 1990s has collapsed into a dystopian, toxic world that has actually run 'out of' space. From the externalised materiality of masculinity in Verhoeven's text, we are now



plunged into an internalised conflict represented both in the dichotomist mapping of geopolitics and in the schizophrenic duality of the hero's psyche. The oppressive atmosphere of the overpopulated labyrinth of slums that is the Colony – located in Australia in this case – echoes the dimly lit one-room apartment Quaid shares with a stern, tense, absent wife. Although heroism is again carved on the body of a working-class man as the archetype of all masculinities, Wiseman's film depicts a more realistic portrait of the grim life of those at base of the social pyramid. Here, class conflicts are played against post-globalisation anxieties that exclude race and ethnicity in favour of a masculinity still reassuringly white. The racialised masses of the Colony are represented as a faceless flock of sheep, paradoxically homogenous in their marginality and helplessness. Interestingly, though, the script pits the white working class protagonist simultaneously against white upper-class men, racialised masculinity and empowered femininity, which neatly dovetails into «a pattern of masculinity that necessitates defining men not by content but by opposition to an other» (Jeffords 2008: 256).

The first opposition I would like to consider is between Quaid and his Black 'clone', to quote Holmlund's terminology (2008: 214-215), a doppelganger that mirrors every aspect of Quaid's circumstances, except the latter's intolerance to subalternity. If Benny's character in the 1990 *Total Recall* was already pointing at the uncanniness of a Black man selfishly betraying other subalterns, Harry's case in the 2012 film is even more telling. He is depicted as a simple man, content with his life, which irritates his white buddy, who, on the contrary, is dead set on upturning a system which denies him of what he feels entitled to. This white man is portrayed as actively seeking to subvert and overcome the injustice of a capitalist system, in the face of the passivity of the racialised citizens of the Colony. This very white man also chooses to see his Black partner as a traitor aligned with the hegemonic powers to bend his will and bring him back into the flock. Contrary to what happens in the corresponding scene in Verhoeven's film, in the 2012 version there is absolutely no indication that Harry might be lying. What is more, there is no proof that Harry had any choice in

taking part in the operation. Unlike Quaid's Italo-American buddy in the 1990 film, who is explicitly revealed as belonging to the government secret agency, this working-class Black man is never seen in any other capacity but that of the concerned friend, eager to help out his restless buddy. Harry is not even armed. In the fictional cosmos of the film, the fact that Quaid does suddenly 'choose' to shoot Harry instead of Melina is underscoring his determination to eliminate any reminder of the fact that everything might be a chemically generated fantasy, the dream he had bought for himself at Rekal Incorporated. But it also leaves Quaid in a world in which Black and white men no longer work side by side.

The second opposition is articulated around the two father figures presented in the 2012 film. On the one hand, we have Cohaagen, the violent, sadistic father. He builds up the destructivity in his symbolic sons, while belittling his symbolic daughter, even though he uses her as much as he uses them. On the other hand, there is Matthias, the gentle, wise, nurturing father who loves both his male and female children, although it is clear that he never intended his daughter to inherit his realm. Both sides of the fatherly diptych must perish in order for Quaid to rise to his position as *the* masculine subject. This may be read as a suggestion of the necessity of a balance between the destructive aggressiveness of past patriarchal models, and the meekness of a reflexive, introspective masculinity that has been historically likened to femininity. In this sense, Quaid would pluck the best of each masculine model, so that he might embody the perfection of a third way. However, a different reading might see Quaid replace *both* standards, thus partaking of both Cohaagen's violence, as the spectator has witnessed throughout the film, and of Matthias's intellectual mightiness, as Quaid's strategic choices demonstrate. Despite claims that a man's identity is in the present, Wiseman's script never allows Quaid to stray from a citational reiteration (Butler 1993: 2-3) of both his symbolic fathers' behavioural pattern. A third interpretation is also possible: that Quaid's Oedipal desire brings him to kill his own symbolic father and to cause the death of Melina's biological father. Cohaagen, the man Quaid's prior identity identifies

with, must be erased in order to put an end to Quaid's subalternity and to a castrating marriage with his symbolic sister. In this case, the third element in the Oedipal triangle is not the mother, but a sister, whom the father purposefully hands out to the son, to soothe his rebelliousness and his desire to usurp the father's throne. This is why, despite Lori's raw sexuality and unarguable sex-appeal, she is always perceived as a castrating device deployed by Coahaagen to keep Quaid subject to the dynamics of traditional patriarchy. The second fatherly figure, Melina's father, must also die so as to enable Quaid to occupy the role of caregiver and protector, as well as in order for him to step up to the highest level in the oppositional system of the subversive 'resistance'. That in either case we are confronted with pyramidal and militaristic societal models is not coincidental. Whether good or bad, hierarchical patriarchy is all that seems to be available.

The third opposition is articulated through the polarisation of the two main female characters, Lori, Quaid's fake wife, and Melina, his true love. In Wiseman's *Total Recall*, Lori absorbs the role Richter had had in Verhoeven's film as Quaid's main pursuer and symbolic sibling. As already mentioned, in the 2012 film, Lori is represented as a female usurper of masculine roles, as a female warrior, responsible for the ongoing 'war of the sexes'. She is thus poised in opposition to Melina, who is devoid of all aggressiveness and self-reliance in the 2012 film, and, on the contrary, relegated to the role of the female sidekick. If Melina is the new Eve in a future Eden, Lori represents Lilith and must be crushed. After Quaid/Hauser kills Lori at the end of the film, a police officer from the Colony shouts at him to drop his gun, only to be replied by another policeman that «[i]t's alright. It's him». As soon as heroic masculinity is back in power, *he* can wave a gun and "it's alright"; *he* can shoot down a woman without being questioned for it.

Both *Total Recall* films shift the focus from destructive to constructive masculinity without actually changing its constitutive features. This explains Melina's initial mistrust of Schwarzenegger's character. Yet, the 2012 version of Melina trusts Colin Farrell's Quaid long before he trusts himself, 'despite' the fact that his facial traits have been surgically altered beyond recognition. What is it then that

Wiseman's Melina is trusting blindly? What is it that she, like everybody else in the resistance, is recognising in him? Precisely the fact that he is still the same man. His archetypical masculinity is still conspicuous notwithstanding the numerous cosmetic alterations that might have been carried out on the surface. It is this very sameness, so reminiscent of the Cartesian dichotomy of Sameness versus Otherness, that is being explicitly sought and unconditionally trusted. Hence, the bottom line of both films and of Dick's short story seems to be that the 'good' alpha male, as portrayed and idealised in traditional patriarchal discourses, has been tamed and anesthetised as much by the 'bad' alpha male as by the masculine female, and is now lost in a dystopian landscape of labyrinthine identities. The only way out, far from entailing social *pro*-gress, that is to say, a journey forward into the future, is a *retro*-gression back into the atavism mentioned by Philip K. Dick, back into the protective womb of narcissistic childhood, or, alternatively, back into the biblical Eden of traditional patriarchy.

In "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale", all of Quails' entity resides in his mind. It is through language, however fragmentary, that he unravels the mystery of his identity, thus saving his self from destruction. On the contrary, both filmic adaptations, precisely due to the re-mediation of the original piece of writing, rely mostly on the visibility of the main character's heroic identity. However, visibility 'per se' is not enough to explain the change from Quail to Quaid. Quail is re-imagined into Quaid not only through the technology of cinema, but also through the visualization of futuristic technology as spectacle in itself. Therefore, on the one hand, Dick's original text is being filtered through the many creative opportunities offered by special effects. On the other hand, Quaid's identity is moulded by his relationship with future technology: he finds his identity either by regaining control over the latter, as we have seen is the case with the 1990 *Total Recall*, or by destroying technology and replacing it with his physical feats, as happens in the 2012 version. In Dick's story, verbal narrativity takes the place of technological memory as the means to reconstruct masculine identity. Quail is last seen, or rather, heard telling of his encounter with the alien species while lying on a hygienic bed,

whereas both Quaid's are last seen in contemplation of their recent conquests: the land before them and the women by their sides. The sequence of events that has led to that final stance is "action-packed", as the cover poster of the 2012 *Total Recall* claims. While human bodies fight vigorously and die violently, an assortment of mechanical contraptions and technological devices grind, shoot, drill, transform landscapes and re-shape minds. It is the hero, though, who stands tall and victorious at the end of it all. Since it is through action that the plot is narrated, in both films physicality eventually substitutes technology as the means to both identify and narrate the masculine self.

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