

## Love, longing and danger: Memory and forgetting in early twenty-first century science fiction films

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### Abstract

This article is concerned with the representation of memory in sf films at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It will examine three films in particular: Michael Winterbottom's *Code 46* (UK/US 2003), Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (US 2004), and Wong Kar-wai's *2046* (France/Germany/Hong Kong/China 2004). These films are concerned with the complexities of chance encounters and elusive relationships, highlighting themes of memory, love, nostalgia and longing. They follow on from an earlier tradition of sf films that focus on memory's subjectivity, but were more preoccupied with the use of technology in creating false or prosthetic memories. The films examined here, however, focus less on the details of technology used in manipulating memory. Instead, their concerns are with the blurring of the distinctions between remembering and forgetting.

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Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, there has been a noticeable presence of sf films that represent meditations on the themes of memory, longing and nostalgia. Michael Winterbottom's *Code 46* (UK/US 2003), Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (US 2004), and Wong Kar-wai's *2046* (France/Germany/Hong Kong/China 2004) are three such examples that were released in the early part of the twenty-first century. These films are unique in their representation of the complexities of chance encounters, elusive relationships, and the themes of memory, love and longing. There has been an earlier tradition of science fiction films in the 1980s and 1990s that focus on memory's subjectivity, films that include *Blade Runner* (Scott US/Hong Kong 1982), *Total Recall* (Verhoeven US 1990), *Strange Days* (Bigelow US 1995) and *Dark City* (Proyas Australia/US 1998). These earlier films are preoccupied with the commodification of memory, and with the use of technology in creating false or prosthetic memories in both humans and androids, and as a consequence, questioning memory's authenticity. While sf films from both periods are set (or have story sections that are set) in either alternative realities or in the future where memories can be manipulated, sf films from the early twenty-first century exhibit a very different characteristic to their predecessors. These later films are often made by filmmakers for whom the depiction of the future or alternative present is of secondary concern compared to the philosophical and emotional thrust of the narrative. The absence of more traditional sf aesthetics and preoccupations in these films creates a contrast to earlier works such as *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall*.

In the 1990s, a rapid expansion in the field of memory studies within the humanities and social sciences, often described as the 'memory boom' (Rossington

and Whitehead 5), meant that our preoccupations with questions of how we remember and forget, and of the subjective nature of our memories, were brought to the fore and became aligned with the complexities of human life in the late twentieth century. Susannah Radstone suggests in her introduction to *Memory and Methodology* that the ‘contemporary explosion’ of scholarly work on memory is part of a more general ‘cultural fascination with memory’ (1). Widespread interest in the fields of virtual memory and prosthetic memory form just a small part of the current preoccupation with memory in Western culture, while migration in the second half of the twentieth century has contributed to the current fascination with genealogy and nostalgia (Whitehead 2). Citing David Lowenthal’s work on the subject of heritage, Anne Whitehead notes that the current obsession with memory is partly a response to the ‘rapid and pervasive change’ brought about by technology (2). Pam Cook, in *Screening the Past*, describes the ‘growing preoccupation with memory and nostalgia’ as one of the most significant developments in film studies since the 1990s (1), mirroring the growth in memory studies across the disciplines around the same time. In *Millennial Cinema*, Sinha and McSweeney suggest that film has had ‘an almost symbiotic interaction with memory’ since its invention, emphasising that memory has been a ‘core component’ of films in the 1990s and 2000s (2, 13). The growth in neurological and theoretical research into memory coincides with the shift in focus on alternative aspects of memory in sf films in the early twenty-first century. *Code 46*, *Eternal Sunshine* and *2046* are less concerned with the details of technology used in manipulating memory and more preoccupied with the emotional and psychological blurring of the distinctions between remembering and forgetting. The fascination with memory in sf films continues unabated, and the themes of memory, longing and nostalgia in early twenty-first century sf in these three films will be examined below. The love relationships foregrounded in these films are heterosexual relationships, and a separate study on the nature of heterosexual relationships in recent sf films may yield useful insights into the fields of gender and sf. Such a study is, however, beyond the scope and focus of this article. This article also veers from the more familiar materialist approach to sf film analysis, and is underpinned instead by a more philosophical approach that incorporates theories of memory and mourning from the work of Paul Ricoeur, and to a lesser extent, Sigmund Freud. The utilisation of Ricoeur’s concepts on memory as well as those of other writers forms the basis for a theoretical reading of these three different films and of their unique thematic variations on memory and longing.

In creating the world of *Code 46*, existing cityscapes of Shanghai and Hong Kong are juxtaposed with the deserts of Dubai and Rajasthan to depict settings that are visually recognisable yet dystopian. In this near future, there is a stark contrast between those living in densely populated cities and those who are excluded from society living on the outskirts and in the desert. The story is narrated retrospectively from the perspective of Maria Gonzalez (Samantha Morton), a technician in a company based in Shanghai manufacturing ‘papelles’, documents that permit people who are medically and legally eligible to travel between countries. She tells the story of her brief relationship with an investigator from Seattle who visited the factory due to allegations of fraud and of papelles being smuggled out from this company. Maria turns out to be the smuggler who makes counterfeit papelles for people who are not officially cleared for travel. The film is an unlikely love story, with an oblique reference to David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (UK, 1945), of two individuals who are forbidden to have romantic and sexual relations. In this near future world that is not too different visually from ours, individuals are forbidden to have sexual relations if

they have genetic similarities. William (Tim Robbins), the investigator, finds out later that Maria is descended from a clone of William's mother, making it a 50% DNA match to him and sexual relations with her classify as a 'Code 46' violation. The penalty for such violations results in all memory of that person's sexual encounter being erased, which is what happens when Maria becomes pregnant with his child. When William eventually finds her at a remote facility outside the city limits, she has no memory at all of her time with him. This second act of the film constitutes William's attempts to help Maria remember their brief time together. In a sense, William narrates Maria's life back to her in an attempt to give her back her memories.

In contrast to *Code 46*, Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine* depicts a parallel world to ours, located in suburban Long Island. One notable difference with our world is the existence of neurological technology that allows for the practice of memory erasure. Lacuna Inc. is one such clinic that offers memory erasure as a private medical treatment. Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet) is a recent patient of this clinic, wishing to have all memory of her failed relationship with Joel Barish (Jim Carrey) erased. Upon discovery of this memory erasure, Joel in turn decides to have his memories of the relationship erased as well. During the memory erasure process, Joel begins to change his mind, and desperately attempts to hold on to those memories. The non-linear narrative structure of the film depicts memory's fragmented and unreliable nature, and the sense of desperation with which the characters hold on to the memories of their past relationship. As Joel relives the happy and sad moments with Clementine, he enters a process of reevaluating their past relationship before deciding that it is indeed worth another attempt. Verena-Susanna Nungesser describes the cinematic 'mimesis of memory' in *Eternal Sunshine* as being influenced by recent developments in the field of memory (35), highlighting the ability for memories to be rewritten upon activation and the unreliability of recall (40-41).

Wong Kar-wai's *2046*, described by Pam Cook as a 'bittersweet essay on love' ('Authorship Revised and Revived' 483), endured a very long gestation before its emergence as an unfinished preview at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004 (Rayns 24). The third film in a loose trilogy featuring recurring characters, *2046* is a nostalgic and atmospheric depiction of multiple intertwined narratives, the central one being set in 1960s Hong Kong and focusing on the character of Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung Chiu-wai), a writer of erotic sf stories. Through his observation of his landlord's daughter and her Japanese lover, Chow is inspired to write a sf story about a place in the distant future called 2046 where people can go to recapture their lost memories. This future world is depicted in a more abstract and speculative manner than the other two films, utilising computer-generated images for exteriors and highly stylised costumes and sets for interiors to convey a sense of futurity. 'All memories are traces of tears', the title at the start of the film, depicts memories as constitutive of elusive relationships and lost love. The painful memories and feelings of nostalgia that surface for the characters in the three films stem from memory traces of a past presumed to have been lost or irretrievable. The first section below will examine the persistence of memory traces that continue to haunt the characters despite undergoing memory erasure. This is followed by the middle section focusing on the use of nostalgia in sf as a tool for preserving the past, and the final section on recognition and mutuality.

### Memory traces and ruins

Memory traces embedded in the minds of the characters trigger the sense of loss and longing that they experience. In *Code 46*, Maria describes a strange dream that has been recurring on her birthday for the last nineteen years. In the dream, she finds herself a passenger on a moving train, falling asleep fast, with nineteen stops to make. She needs to find someone specific on the train before the journey ends. Her next birthday will mark the final year of this dream and the final stop on the train journey. This dream sequence proves to be a crucial trigger for her subconscious when her memory of her brief affair with William is erased following the Code 46 violation. As the train reaches the last stop in the final iteration of the dream, Maria sees that the person she is looking for on the train is indeed William. This fragment from the past,



*Code 46*. Verve Pictures. 2008.

in the form of a recurring dream, becomes the final piece of the puzzle that enables Maria to overcome the memory erasure. Ricoeur states that memory and loss are inextricably linked as our memories of the past are often the result of the experiences of loss that we have encountered ('A Dialogue' 23). The process of coming to terms with loss is described by Freud in his 1917 essay *Mourning and Melancholia* as the act of mourning. Freud considers the act of mourning to be a period when the individual comes to terms with the loss of a loved one or an object of affection. Once the individual who is suffering finally comes to terms with that loss, the emotional attachment to the lost person or object is severed. As the emotional attachment to the lost object gradually decreases, the memory of this object also begins to fade. This process constitutes a kind of forgetting. It is a forgetting, however, that can never be permanent due to the pervasive nature of memories. The enforced erasure of Maria's memories of William does not eradicate all traces of their past relationship. In describing concealed psychical memory traces, Ricoeur argues that they have not been 'definitively erased' but have instead been 'rendered inaccessible, unavailable'. These memory traces lie dormant through a form of profound forgetting that Ricoeur terms the 'reserve of forgetting' (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 416-7). This is a testament to the 'unperceived character of the perseverance of memories', where a reserve of forgetting allows the memories to be '[removed] from the vigilance of consciousness' (440), ready to resurface again some time in the future. Maria, now no longer seeing William as a distant figure but remembering him as her lover (her lost

object), runs away with him as a fugitive to Jebel Ali to evade the authorities. Ryan Gilbey describes *Code 46* as ‘a film about memory as an act of defiance’ (34), an apt description of the tension between the established world order that insists on the effacement of Maria’s memories and her attempt at wrestling back those memories. Memory, depicted as an act of defiance against forgetting, is a theme that has been explored in recent sf films. Technology in earlier sf films is often represented as a threat to our real memories through erasure or the implanting of false memories, but in more recent sf films such as *Code 46* and *Eternal Sunshine* technologies have been shown to fail in suppressing memories as they still resurface post-erasure. Technology is deemed incapable of erasing all memory traces, and feelings of longing and nostalgia from lost love and failed relationships continue to haunt the characters. In all three films, there is in evidence a notable scepticism towards technology and a critique of the lack of human connection evident in technologies that are meant to enhance human life. The near future world represented in *Code 46* depicts a believable juxtaposition of power between the clinical and mechanised metropolises of the U.S. and China, and the dirty and freewheeling sprawls of the deserts in the Middle East. The desert and the Middle East has become a site of lost memories and hope, a reminder of a former world that is slowly being forgotten, a place where according to Maria’s father ‘you could do anything there, as long as you wanted it enough’. The narratives in these sf films describe acts of defiance by the characters against the forces of memory erasure and forgetting. These acts are not conveyed through thrilling action sequences that are found in sf films from the 1980s and 1990s, but occur mostly within the unconscious mind, often featuring nostalgia as a means by which memories are triggered.

Advances in neuroscience and psychology in the 1990s presented new neural models of cognition. Antonio Damasio’s research on the neurology of emotion and memory proposed that earlier models of recall and memory processes were inadequate in describing the complexities of how we store and retrieve past experiences. Damasio demonstrated the existence of convergence zones, which were synaptic patterns located within cortices of the brain (‘Time-locked’ 45-7). Convergence zones allow for the ‘unique combinational arrangement’ of experiences in time and space that are recorded and later retrieved. Each record is termed the binding code, and the various fragments of a code or a remembered event are stored in multiple cortical regions within the brain. These elements are activated simultaneously when a memory is recalled or when an individual tries to make sense of a present event in the light of the past. Damasio argues that convergence zones are not rigid systems, and it is always possible for memory fragments that do not belong to the same experiential set as the one being recalled to be retroactivated, resulting in a range of responses from the remembering subject (47). Damasio’s research underlined the complexity and unpredictability of how memory fragments are stored and activated as part of our everyday mental processes. While memories represented in earlier sf films appear as commodities (*Strange Days*) or false memories (*Blade Runner*, *Total Recall* and *Dark City*), memories represented in more recent sf films often exist as links to a real past. Such memories are preserved and kept safe through a recurring dream (*Code 46*), a promise (*Eternal Sunshine*), and sf stories (*2046*). Memories represented in these films are far more unpredictable and take on a life of their own in the minds of the characters. These early twenty-first century sf films depict characters experiencing moments of existential crises and losses of identity, but with narratives that also tell the story of an act of defiance against the forces of memory erasure and forgetting.

It is symbolic that when Clementine introduces herself to Joel at the beginning of *Eternal Sunshine* she explains her striking hair colour as ‘Blue Ruin’ (which is also the name of a drink she makes for him later on in that first act). In many ways *Eternal Sunshine* is a film about the ruins and fragments of memory, and this is conveyed through the *mise en scène*. The narrative, described by Nungesser as displaying a fragmented structure (44), is akin to the disjointed and uncanny experiences of memory and forgetting. The film makes use of Clementine’s hair colour variations to symbolise the different versions of Clementine experienced and remembered by Joel. The version of Clementine with blue hair indicates the ‘present’ timeline post-memory erasure, and the red-haired version of Clementine signifies their earlier tumultuous relationship pre-memory erasure. Commenting on the use of sculpture in the films of Alain Resnais and Chris Marker in the mid-twentieth century, Brian Dillon suggests that both *Last Year in Marienbad* (France/Italy 1961) and *La Jetée* (France 1962) are partly ‘films about ruins’ that depict the remains of vanished civilisations, traces of memories and fantasised futures (28). The ruins of memory depicted in *Eternal Sunshine* are comparatively more personal in nature, but no less resonant. ‘Red’ Clementine’s presence in Joel’s memories represents the ruins of their previous relationship, appearing in various flashback episodes during memory erasure. Part of the erasure process at Lacuna Inc. includes bringing in physical objects that remind patients of the person they want to forget. Dr Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson), who leads the Lacuna Inc. clinic, states that these items, representing the ‘emotional core’ of Joel’s memories, are to be used to create a map of Clementine in Joel’s brain, prior to the memory erasure procedure later on. Nungesser describes these objects as having ‘the capacity to preserve both their mnemonic and their emotional impact’ in the film (37). During the erasure process, represented by the sudden and disjunctive cuts from one memory fragment to another as they are erased, Joel has a change of heart and desperately tries to hang on to the memories he has left. One of these significant memories takes place under the covers of a bed where Clementine shares with Joel an intimate childhood memory concerning her doll and her fear of looking ugly. Clementine pleads with Joel to never leave her. The poignancy of this scene is highlighted further with its soft focus and the increased length of the shot. This memory, and many others signifying key events in their past relationship, are eventually erased by Dr Mierzwiak. However, there is a very strong sense that by the end of the film these memory traces still remain.



*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Momentum Pictures. 2005.

In Wong's trilogy of films, culminating in *2046*, the philosophical concept of the memory trace and of profound forgetting is depicted through the complex web of recurring plotlines, characters and even actors. Beginning with the title declaring memory's association with the 'traces of tears', the film's multi-layered narrative produces a trail of loss and longing that involves an ensemble of characters (mainly female) with Tony Leung's emotionally elusive Chow Mo-wan as the fulcrum, producing 'a set of symphonic variations on the theme of unfulfilled love' (Rayns 25). Chow, already a recurring lead character from Wong's *In the Mood for Love* (Hong Kong/France 2000), is also a reincarnation of sorts of Yuddy from *Days of Being Wild* (Hong Kong 1990). This trilogy represents Wong's meditation on love and nostalgia based around the story of the elusive character of Chow/Yuddy. Recurring female characters from the earlier films, including Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung and Gong Li) and Lulu (Carina Lau), become ghost-like figures that haunt the narrative, generating a sense of loss and regret from past romantic encounters. The plot in *2046* continues Chow's story last seen in the conclusion to *In the Mood for Love*. He leaves Singapore to return to a turbulent Hong Kong in the 1960s. In the earlier film Chow was writing stories in the form of martial arts serials, and here in *2046* he continues his fledgling career as a writer, but this time writing erotic sf and fantasy stories. He confesses that his stories often include characters that are based on people whom he has encountered in the past. He befriends the hotel manager's daughter Jing Wen (Faye Wong), who eventually becomes a co-writer with him on his stories. Inspired by her relationship with a Japanese man (Takuya Kimura), he writes a story titled '2047' (which is coincidentally the number of his hotel room) set in the distant future about the only person, Tak (also played by Takuya Kimura), who has ever returned from a place called 2046. In this future world, 2046 is a destination where people go to recapture their lost memories. '2047' is the story of Tak's return journey on a train from 2046 and his romantic encounter with an android (also played by Faye Wong) who reminds him of his lost love. There are two instances of the recurrence of earlier narratives in



2046. Tartan Video. 2005.

'2047': the mysterious destination 2046 signifies a recurrence of the hotel room that Chow's character stays in *In the Mood for Love*; the love story of Tak and the android mirrors Jing Wen and her Japanese boyfriend's illicit relationship. Chow had intended for the sf story to represent Jing Wen and her boyfriend, but in reality there are traces of Chow himself within the story. There are glimpses of him in Tak, whose life is scarred by instances of unfulfilled love and memories that he longs to recapture,<sup>1</sup> and elements of his distant nature are portrayed in the 'delayed reactions' of the android and its inability to connect emotionally with Tak. In a way that is different to that of *Code 46* and *Eternal Sunshine*, the android's mannerisms represent the scepticism towards technology's ability to control memories. The frustration experienced by Tak towards the android reflects the lack of human connection that is often evident in technologies that are designed to enhance human life.

### **Loss, longing and nostalgia**

In his essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud described mourning as a 'reaction to the real loss of a loved object' (259). During this reaction phase, 'reality-testing' proves that 'the loved object no longer exists', but the libidinal attachment to the object is so intense that there is a strong opposition to the demands of reality to break off all attachments with the object (253). Freud claims that the 'respect for reality' usually wins over the urge to cling on to the object, and this process is called the work of mourning. The process, however, is a long and very painful one where great quantities of time and emotional energy are spent as the 'existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged', and where 'memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object' are brought up (253). Inherent in these three films is a powerful sense of loss and longing experienced through unrequited love, illicit relationships, and relationships that had ended abruptly. Peter Brunette quotes from an interview with Tony Rayns where Wong discusses how 'memory is actually about a sense of loss', and the importance of that element in drama (20). According to Freud, the sense of loss related to these 'loved objects' triggers the resurfacing of memories tied to the objects as a source of solace and reminiscence, allowing for the prolonged existence of these objects in the mind of the subject.

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<sup>1</sup> Chow would eventually fall in love with Jing Wen who does not reciprocate his feelings, perpetuating the cycle of unfulfilled love and longing that he seems to find himself in.



Freud's description of the work of mourning applies to the individual who eventually wishes to forget. The three films in question, however, depict lead characters who, at different stages, desire to never forget the loved object. This desire to never forget often carries with it a sense of nostalgia - a bittersweet longing for a past that can never be fully regained. Utopian and sf writing is often tinged with such a deep sense of nostalgia. The longing for a better world is indicative of a sense of wish-fulfilment inherent in writing. It is a longing that is manifest not only in the characters, but in the viewer/reader as well. Middleton and Woods describe the strange yet familiar world in the sf text as one that alludes to our own world and its history:

Science fiction can be described as an attempt to understand history... . Stories about the future are, therefore, indices of the ways in which contemporary culture lives in time and history, because they act out fantasies of transforming and sometimes redeeming the past, as well as hopes of sustaining present conditions (251-2).

This description of the function of sf highlights the inextricable link that exists between sf and history, and the collective desires of viewers/readers that are projected through sf (252). The setting of possible, alternative worlds is a powerful concept, tinged by the deep sense of nostalgia. In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson argues that while sf often depicts future worlds, its deepest subject 'may in fact be our own historical present' (345). Writing in the context of Philip K. Dick's novels, Jameson suggests that the worlds of the future in sf serve the purpose of displacing our present into the past, allowing for the present to be perceived as history, and creating a sense of nostalgia where the present is longed for as the lost object (380-81). This sense of longing for the present is evident in *2046*, where the year 2046 denotes 'the end of the fifty-year grace period of Hong Kong's handover to China', and when the 'reintegration of the nation-state is to be completed' (Lee 133). That year carries implications for the political, economic and social future of Hong Kong's inhabitants, and Wong's film looks back unrepentantly to the 1960s, a time he remembers vividly from his childhood (Brunette 20). There is a sense here of a reluctance to move forward with the imperative of time and progress, and this sentiment is very much reflected in Chow's sf story '2047'. As a writer, Chow utilises sf as a means to preserve the past in defiance against the loss of memory. He preserves it through the futurity of the world he creates in '2047'.



2046. Tartan Video. 2005.

Nostalgia in cinema has too often been dismissed by critics as signifying a refusal to move on from the past and indulging in idealised reminiscences. Cook describes nostalgia as ‘a state of longing for something that is known to be irretrievable, but is sought anyway’ (*Screening the Past* 3). She contends that rather than being associated with regression and sentimentality, nostalgia can be a means of coming to terms with the past. It is a longing for the idealised lost object, while acknowledging the irretrievability of that object in actuality (4). Like *In the Mood for Love, 2046* can be described as an ‘affecting evocation’ of the passing of an era in Hong Kong’s history, and the ‘loss of identity’ of those caught up in it (10). Utilising Cook’s analysis, we observe that nostalgia functions as an aid in Freud’s work of mourning. Nostalgia allows for an emotional outlet where the psychological prolonging of the lost object through memories may happen, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that the object is gone forever. John J. Su contributes a further dimension to nostalgia by suggesting its provision of a mode for ‘imagining more fully what has been and continues to be absent’ (9), and in bringing a clearer focus to what our needs really are (175). Taking this positive description of nostalgia further, it can become a persistent tool of resistance against forgetting.

This positive aspect of nostalgia is foregrounded in both *Code 46* and *Eternal Sunshine*, where the longed for object carries a deep, personal significance to the one remembering. Jebel Ali, the port town near Dubai, represents Maria’s memories of her childhood with her parents in *Code 46*. The place holds meaning for Maria not because she has been there before, but because her parents have told her stories about it as a child. When Maria and William become fugitives, Maria turns to the nostalgia of her childhood memories in a time of crisis and a place that would represent a safe haven from the authorities. When they arrive in Jebel Ali, the atmosphere is in stark contrast to the cleanliness, order and technology of the metropolises of Shanghai and Seattle. The sharp focus, clean and clinical lines of Shanghai, together with the darkness of night-time that is associated with life in the cities, soon gives way to daylight and a softer camera focus as they arrive in the hustle and bustle of Jebel Ali. This change in mood and lighting corresponds with William’s first encounter with Maria in Shanghai where mostly static camera work is replaced by steadicam shots, a softer focus, and a more intimate music score. As they travel by boat on the river, the scene conveys the freedom of a world without borders, and the sense of nostalgia for a world that existed when travel used to be less tightly controlled, when people did not need passports for cover to travel, and when people could have intimate relations with whoever they wished. The sense of nostalgia in *Eternal Sunshine* is foregrounded during the memory erasure process, leading subsequently to a change of heart when Joel desperately tries to have the procedure aborted so as not to lose all his cherished memories of Clementine. Poignant moments of memory, such as Clementine’s story about her doll mentioned earlier, and their trip to the Charles River where they lie on the frozen river, depict moments of contentment and trust between the two. The nostalgia of these moments subsequently triggers the recognition within Joel of the importance of those memories. In both films, nostalgia becomes a crucial aid in the characters’ desperate and continual resistance against forgetting. Memories represent the very essence of individual and communal human experience. The forward thrust of technological and biological progress in the worlds of both films threatens the survival of these experiences.

## Remembering and recognition

In the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur identifies a crucial element in the workings of tradition:

It signifies that the temporal distance separating us from the past is not a dead interval but a transmission that is generative of meaning (221).

The absent space within the narrative of any given text is indicative of this temporal distance; it is not an empty space, but one that is imbued with meaning through events in the past that have taken place and that are still in communication with events in the present. This points to the occurrence of an active and constant transmission of meaning in the gap between the past and the present. This active interval between past and present is further expanded upon from a neurophysiological perspective in *The Feeling of What Happens*, one of Damasio's key texts on emotion and consciousness. Damasio describes a vital aspect of the self he calls the autobiographical self, where memory is utilised to develop a person's sense of identity and personhood (222). The sense of identity created by each person is based on his or her autobiographical memories stored up over time that are constantly subject to remodelling, whether consciously or unconsciously (224-5). Memories are not static entities that are stored in mental repositories, but are instead constantly modified by the remembering subject. The changes experienced in the lifetime of the autobiographical self are not only due to the constant remodelling of the lived past, but also the remodelling of the 'anticipated future', where the memories of desires, wishes and aspirations exert their influence on the self. Damasio also agrees that certain contents of autobiographical memory will remain submerged below a person's consciousness for long periods of time (227). Given the nature of memory where it undergoes 'reconstruction' during retrieval, some submerged memories may be reconstructed differently to the original record and in turn promote the retrieval of other memories that may initially seem unrelated, but are in actual fact part of 'a web of connections' formed among memory stores. In *Code 46*, Maria's recurring birthday dream of walking through the train generates a momentum of memory, culminating in the recognition of William as the person she had always known and had always been seeking. When Maria has her memories of William erased, the gaps in her memory actively generate meaning from those dreams, allowing them to involuntarily enter her mind as she sits onboard a train bound for the airport to meet William. The trail of loss and longing through the 'traces of tears' in *2046* is personified in the Chow/Yuddy character in Wong's trilogy, culminating in the fictional character Tak in Chow's '2047' story. Tak falls in love with the android on the train who reminds him of his lost love. The android is a symbol of the recurring lost loves experienced by the Chow/Yuddy character generated by the active transmission of meaning through the narratives set within Wong's trilogy.

During the memory erasure procedure in *Eternal Sunshine*, Joel's pact with the Clementine in his fading memory to meet in Montauk is an affirmation of the strength of their relationship and the hope that they will give their new selves (post-erasure) another chance at happiness, knowing that their old selves will disappear forever from memory. With the unexpected return of their old testimony audiotapes and memory objects from Lacuna Inc., courtesy of the receptionist Mary Svevo (Kirsten Dunst), they now have audio and visual testimony from their former selves of

their earlier relationship. Their new future together will forever be haunted by the past, and be influenced by their former lives together with all its associated successes and failures. In unconsciously finding one another again in Montauk post-erasure, Joel and Clementine demonstrate the transcendent power of mutual recognition. Ricoeur describes recognition as ‘a minor miracle’ of memory, testifying to the faithfulness of the original memory impression (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 416). Through the transmission of meaning in the gap between their old and new selves, they become strangely drawn to one another. In the instance of their old memories being returned to them through Mary’s actions, the sudden revelation of their past relationship threatens to end any future hope of them being together. At the most significantly poignant moment towards the end of the film, Joel calls out to the departing Clementine and implores her ‘to wait for just a while’. It is at this moment,



*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Momentum Pictures. 2005.

while waiting for recognition to happen, that Clementine remembers the reason why they are drawn to each other in the first place, and utters the affirmative ‘okay’. Joel repeats the ‘okay’ after Clementine warns him of her shortcomings, signifying his acceptance of whatever events may come their way. Their ‘okay’s represent their mutual recognition of a possible new beginning beyond their old selves, and the chance to build new memories and new futures for the both of them. This mutuality is represented visually in the scene as Joel and Clementine both occupy the middle ground on either side of the final shot, with the brightly lit corridor before them indicative of the journey they are about to embark upon. Troy Jollimore suggests that though these ‘okay’s, the final words spoken in the film, are ‘hesitant, uncertain, and somewhat tremulous’, they ‘strike a courageous, even thrilling note of affirmation and endorsement’ (54). This act proves that they are ‘true lovers’ as they pledge themselves to each other, despite knowing that they will ‘live not happily, but miserably, ever after’ (59). And yet, there remains an elusive quality to their relationship, one that is prevalent in all three films. The final scene of Joel and Clementine playing on the snow-covered beach is repeated on a loop as the closing song by Beck begins. Perhaps Joel and Clementine’s encounter with one another is just one in a series of repeated occurrences over time. However, Clementine’s hair is dyed red in that final scene, symbolising Joel’s old memory of their previous

relationship. This gives us a tentative hope that their relationship post-erasure (with the 'blue' Clementine) might stand the test of time.

The mutual recognition experienced by both Clementine and Joel exemplify the social aspect of Ricoeur's philosophy concerning memory and identity. We are all witnesses and therefore have the capability to testify to the lives we come into contact with. In discussing the links between the duty of memory and the idea of justice in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur speaks of a debt that is not limited to the concept of guilt. It is a debt we each have 'to those who have gone before us for part of what we are' (89). He adds:

The duty of memory is not restricted to preserving the material trace, ... but maintains the feeling of being obligated with respect to these others, of whom we shall later say, not that they are no more, but that they were (89).

As individuals we are all inextricably linked through our influences on one another, and in fulfilling the duty to remember those whose lives have influenced us we acknowledge that interconnectedness of our lives, the fact that we all exist and that our existence depends on those who have gone on before us. Ricoeur is emphasising here the importance of affirming our memories of each other, allowing for a sense of mutual recognition to take place where we acknowledge our co-dependency. It is important here to observe that Ricoeur does not emphasise the importance of memory as a matter of historical record, but rather the importance placed on affirming the lives that have existed. There is, however, a problem here with Ricoeur's call to remember one another: what if an individual is never allowed to forget a painful memory? Maria's fate at the conclusion of *Code 46* condemns her to being an outcast from society, burdened with the memory of her brief relationship with William, knowing that he will have no memory of her existence due to an enforced memory erasure, and no knowledge of her plight. Their relationship, like any other, demands mutual recognition and affirmation of each other's love. Without this mutuality, remembering becomes a solitary and lonely undertaking. Perhaps we ought to be inspired by Chow's method of relieving himself of the burden of memory in *2046*. Repeating a motif originating from *In the Mood for Love*, Chow's sf story '2047' recounts an old saying:

Do you know what people did in the old days when they had secrets that they didn't want to share? They'd climb a mountain, find a tree, carve a hole in it, whisper the whole secret into the hole and cover it up with mud. That way, nobody else would ever learn the secret.

In the story, the traveller Tak whispers into a hole somewhere on the train his secret of what happened to him in the place 2046. Likewise, the android he fell in love with whispers her secret into the hole. The psychical transference of the burden of memory from the subject to an inanimate location allows for a wistful and profound forgetting, one that is not dissimilar to Ricoeur's suggestion of a reserve of forgetting as described earlier. The duty to remember is a difficult concept to come to terms with, particularly when it involves painful memories. The mutual recognition experienced by Clementine and Joel in *Eternal Sunshine* provides the best illustration of the positive fulfilment of affirmation. During their attempts (in Joel's mind) to escape from Lacuna Inc.'s memory erasure procedure, they find themselves in Barnes &

Noble where Clementine works, re-enacting Joel's attempt at asking her for a date. Being fully aware that his memory of Clementine will soon be completely eradicated, Joel says to her, 'It'll be different. If we could just give it another go around.' Clementine gives a poignant reply, 'Remember me. Try your best. Maybe we can.' In defiance of the memory erasure process that is nearly at a stage of completion, Joel makes a promise to his memory of Clementine that he will not let her be forgotten.<sup>2</sup> This final act of mutual recognition in Joel's mind culminates in a return to the place where they first met - the beach house in Montauk. Unlike in the original event, Joel, in this alternative reality in his mind, chooses to stay with Clementine that night in the unoccupied beach house rather than return to his friends' party nearby. In doing so, he allows them to share a final moment of affirmation and to say goodbye to their old selves before erasure is complete. Joel and Clementine, like Maria and William in *Code 46*, have become memory fugitives on the run from the present, hiding their final memories for as long as they can within secret repositories in the mind. Clementine's covert message to 'meet [her] in Montauk' becomes a secret pact in Joel's mind, giving their future selves a chance to meet again. Pigott describes this scene in the film as contributing to the idea 'that memory can be the site of dynamic thought, decision, and action', opposing the preconceived notion of memory as 'an immotile and somewhat faded image of the past' (188). The pact that Joel makes in his subconscious with Clementine to remember each other and their eventual reunion in Montauk (albeit as strangers) represents the film's convictions that the emotional core of memories cannot be fully eradicated by technology, and that particular objects and even words 'preserve their meaning' and can still trigger certain emotions in both Joel and Clementine (Nungesser 43). Michael Pigott argues that for the past to be truly erased, memory traces need to be eradicated both internally (in the mind) and externally (physical items). This, he suggests, is in the end impossible to achieve because the past is 'communal', an individual's viewpoint is part of 'a greater, all-encompassing, ever-increasing Past' (189).

The concerns with the fragile and fleeting aspects of human relationships and memory in early twenty-first century sf films are evidenced in the three films examined here. Earlier sf films from the 1980s and 1990s often focused on the direct antagonism between technology and humanity, their narratives preoccupied with postmodern critiques of individual human identity. A number of early twenty-first century sf films have signalled a move away from these preoccupations to focus on the elusive nature of memory and the interconnectedness of our lives and realities. This might be partly in response to the blurring of national and cultural boundaries of the contemporary era and the heightened interdependence of human existence, as well as an acknowledgement of the complexities of the mind in relation to memory. The social aspect of human existence involves the affirmation of the memory of the lives

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<sup>2</sup> It soon becomes clear to the audience that the Clementine (with red hair) portrayed here is really Joel's memory of her from their earlier failed relationship, thus implying that his conversations with Clementine during the memory erasure procedure are in actuality his interactions with his own psyche. George Toles argues, however, that by this stage of Joel's reminiscences of Clementine, he has finally grasped the essence of her character in his mind, bringing an authenticity to these ruminations (145). It is certainly possible, and even hinted at through Clementine's (post-erasure with blue hair) distress, that she too experienced a similar struggle to Joel's in trying to cling on to her memories of Joel during her memory erasure procedure. This moment of distress is seen during the scene in Clementine's flat when Lacuna Inc. employee Patrick (Elijah Wood) tries to win Clementine's affections by appropriating Joel's memories of her. During Clementine's memory erasure session at Lacuna Inc., it is possible that she made a similar pact with the Joel in her memory to remember each other and meet in Montauk, as they finally do.

we come into contact with in the course of our lifetimes. Ricoeur's philosophical work on mutual recognition brings into focus this interconnectedness and co-dependency that is a critical aspect of our humanity. We cannot remember on our own, and we need the help of others to remember. As mentioned earlier, both Cook and Su suggest a move away from the negative preconceptions of nostalgia and a turn to its more positive aspect in identifying our emotional needs and as a means of coming to terms with the past. The narratives of the three films depict moments of catharsis for the main characters as a consequence of these feelings of longing and nostalgia. At other times these feelings become the catalyst for testimonies of people and relationships that are thought to be lost forever, testimonies that appear in the form of a memory-image album (*Code 46*), physical objects and diaries (*Eternal Sunshine*), and a sf story (*2046*). There is inherent in sf films of the early twenty-first century a culture of loss, longing and the elusiveness of relationships that follow in the tradition of films meditating on similar themes such as *Brief Encounter*. The sense of existential crisis depicted through sf provides an imaginative canvas with which to meditate on these themes. In her study on retrofuturism, Sharon Sharp argues that different forms of sf in film and television can engage with the 'sense of nostalgia' experienced by the audience, and serve as 'a form of critique' of their preconceptions (25-6). *Code 46*, *Eternal Sunshine* and *2046* demonstrate the potential of sf films in engaging meaningfully with issues of loss, forgetting and nostalgia, and in serving as a critique of our preconceived ideas concerning nostalgia and memory. These concerns are sustained and further expanded upon in films as diverse as Duncan Jones's *Moon* (UK 2009), Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (US/UK 2010) and Mark Romanek's *Never Let Me Go* (UK/US 2010)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that two of these films (*Moon* and *Never Let Me Go*) touch upon the issue of memory in human clones.

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