

Analog Amnesia in the Digital Age

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## ABSTRACT

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A culturally and historically particular understanding of modern memory underscores ongoing popular debates concerning the status of human memory in the digital age. In an era circumscribed by anxiety around the extent to which digital technologies are eroding the boundaries of the human, this thesis argues that a bifurcated model of memory has emerged. This is to say that our understanding of human memory in the digital age has splintered along technological lines; on one hand, a model of technologically mediated memory associated with digital technologies and, on the other, a kind of subconscious embodied memory aligned with the human in its ‘natural’ state. Such a scenario insists on the distinction between the conscious memories we preserve through external technologies and the dormant memories housed in the depths of our psyches, which are imagined to be less amenable to technological intervention. We can observe this bifurcated model of memory at work in cinematic representations of amnesia in many recent Hollywood films, though this thesis will focus on Peter Segal’s *50 First Dates* (2004) as a case study. Firstly, I examine how this dyadic model of memory emerges from the film’s nostalgic privileging of analog technologies, by virtue of their connection to the human body, as opposed to digital technologies, which are regarded more apprehensively due to their alienation from the body. Secondly, I work through the broader significance of this twofold model of memory for contemporary debates around authorship and the domains of private and public (virtual) space. Ultimately, through a symptomatic analysis of the intersecting functions of memory, technology, and intimacy in *50 First Dates*, this project endeavours to demonstrate how this dyadic model of memory informs and is informed by discourses around what it means to be human in the digital age.

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## **Introduction**

*50 First Dates*, Peter Segal's broad romantic comedy, deals with memory loss as a disruptive force in a romantic relationship. Complicating this disruption further is the complex role technology and material culture play in memory processes throughout the film. As such, the film stages a convergence of the central intersecting issues of this project: memory, technology, and intimacy. By conducting a symptomatic reading of *50 First Dates*, I aim to take seriously the film's hierarchical taxonomy of memory technologies along the analog/digital spectrum and explore its engagement with the status of memory in the age of technology. This thesis works through a case study analysis of *50 First Dates* in two key stages. The first chapter, "The Eternal Sunshine of Lucy's Mind: A Bifurcated Model of Modern Memory," constituting the bulk of my textual analysis, works through the film's understanding of the relationship between memory and material culture – the objects along the analog/digital spectrum that we use to mediate, preserve, and even supplant our memories. What emerges from this relationship is a model of a technologically mediated memory that reflects particular cultural concerns of the early Twenty-First Century, specifically regarding the extent to which technology is eroding our memory and our ability to form intimate relationships with others. Similar to other contemporary amnesia films, *50 First Dates* contrasts this technologically mediated memory with a kind of subconscious embodied memory, aligned with analog technologies imagined to bear a close indexical relationship to the body. The second chapter, "My Private Alaska: Memory, Technology, and (Co)Authorship," investigates the extent to which this technologically mediated memory renders itself vulnerable to the claims of multiple authors, and works through the power dynamics that emerge in such a situation. Specifically, I aim to elucidate how a model of technologically mediated memory punctuates what has been called a "participatory turn"<sup>1</sup> in

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<sup>1</sup> Burgess, 13.

contemporary memory processes (largely through the use of personal computers) in which we struggle to act as effective gatekeepers to our personal memory ‘archives’ in the face of corporate ownership (and algorithmic organization) of our most intimate ‘data.’ More broadly, I seek to examine how the film positions love as a kind of panacea to the failings of human memory and the encroaching threat of technology. By focusing on the phenomenon of amnesia, both chapters emphasize how this dyadic model of modern memory (or memory loss) may disrupt and (re)structure intimacy in a romantic coupling. For *50 First Dates*, while technologically mediated memory may facilitate courtship, it is subconscious embodied memory that houses ‘true love.’ This thesis argues that we may productively read the central project of the film to be the conceptual prying apart of love and memory. If new technologies (and perhaps particularly the internet) are perceived to threaten the territory of human memory, which anxieties are assuaged by dislocating love from the space of memory? Or, more precisely, what are the implications of the film’s effort to divorce love from *technologically mediated* memory, but not from the alternative model of subconscious embodied memory? Ultimately, by analyzing the assumptions and imperatives informing the representation of technologically mediated memory in *50 First Dates*, I endeavour to place the film in dialogue with broader sociocultural anxieties and popular understandings of the function and worth of human memory in the digital age.

Before examining how *50 First Dates* approaches these questions, it is necessary to articulate more precisely the film’s sociohistorical position in relation to discourses around life in the age of the Internet. Sociologist Saskia Sassen, whose work has been foundational in the study of globalization in the digital age, outlines a concise description of the evolution of this situation as follows:



“We have three phases of the Internet. The first phase is that of the hackers, where access was the issue, making the software available. The second one, when you begin to have the interest by private actors that did not quite know how to use it. It still was mostly a public space, in some ways protected. And now a third stage, the invasion of cyberspace by corporate actors: It’s really combat out there.”<sup>2</sup>

In addition to providing a rough sketch of a general and gradual slippage from libertarian optimism about the radical potentialities of the web into disillusionment at the corporate co-opting of online community, Sassen makes a useful distinction between different “phases” of the Internet. In 2004, we can understand *50 First Dates* to be hovering at the precipice between the second and third phase; online communities, chat rooms, and virtual worlds like Second Life proliferate, but the perhaps more organized corporate social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have yet to emerge, at least as we know them today. Perhaps because of this precarious position and the uncertainty surrounding the future of life with and through the Internet, an air of concern, if not paranoia, tends to infuse assumptions about the status of human memory in the digital age. Psychologist Sherry Turkle is perhaps one of the higher profile examples of such an attitude. As recently as 2015, Turkle wrote a book entitled *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. In Turkle’s earlier book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, published in 2011, the introduction begins as follows: “Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies. These days, it suggests substitutions that put the real on the run.”<sup>3</sup> This brief yet important passage reveals two key perceptions that circumscribe discourse around the status of human

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<sup>2</sup> Sassen, 105.

<sup>3</sup> Turkle, *Alone Together*, 1.

memory, or perhaps simply the human in general, in the digital age. Turkle's first claim casts technology as an agent that structures intimate relationships, which, reading between the lines, ostensibly ought to be negotiated 'directly' between human beings. Secondly, Turkle contends that technology 'suggests substitutions' to what would otherwise be 'natural' mechanisms of intimacy that actively threaten 'the real.' In Turkle's model, 'technology' writ large emerges not only as an unworthy substitute, but also an antagonist force hacking at the human faculties it endeavours to replace, the logical response then becomes to defend the human from the digital. Turkle's books are typically best-sellers, as are publications with similar investigative concerns such as Nicholas Carr's, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2011. The remarkable popularity of these and countless other accounts from the digital doldrums – of how digital technologies, particularly the Internet and 'smart' devices, are affecting how we interact (or not) with each other and even the chemistry of our brains – speaks to both the ubiquity and the lasting power of technophobic impulses in our time. Moreover, it appears that the common 'solution' to the perils of the digital age is articulated through a re-commitment to the human, and perhaps especially the human body, in its 'natural' (i.e., pre-digital) state. It is this techno-phobic and -philic 'combat,' to borrow from Sassen, that constitutes the contextual background of both the production of *50 First Dates* and my subsequent analysis.

## **TERMS OF USE**

Given the triangular conceptual framework of this thesis, it is necessary here to pause and clarify my use of the key terms 'memory,' 'technology,' and 'intimacy.' To begin, although my

own conception of memory is certainly informed by philosophical theorizations<sup>4</sup> and scientific accounts<sup>5</sup> – indeed, this thesis does not avoid reference to the field of neuropsychology – my intention is not to propose a model of memory that is strictly ‘correct’ in terms of what we know of the workings of the human brain. Rather, my interest in memory for the purposes of this project begins and ends with the bifurcated model of memory that emerges from cinematic representations of amnesia and what this model may reveal about how we understand the status of memory in the digital age, whatever the case may *actually* be. After all, as Kilbourn reminds us apropos of *The Bourne Ultimatum* and its tacit agreement with Sigmund Freud’s assertion that that which is repressed endures the passage of time, “such thoroughly ‘unscientific’ notions remain fixtures in popular cinema’s representation of memory.”<sup>6</sup> Thus it becomes important not to offer a corrective to chronic misrepresentation, but rather to investigate the particularities of popular representations of memory in the digital age. It follows that in my construction and differentiation of subconscious embodied memory on the one hand and technologically mediated memory on the other, I do not purport to have ‘discovered’ a theory of modern memory. Instead, the task of this thesis is to investigate the underlying ideological frameworks that contribute to the popular understanding of human memory in the digital age reflected in the film. Furthermore, due in part because *50 First Dates* depicts an amnesiac subject, my focus on memory attends less to memory as a process of inscribing new memories or even as an act of recollection and more to a model of memory as storage. As suggested by the aforementioned dyadic model of memory,

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<sup>4</sup> Works consulted include Henri Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*, Gilles Deleuze’s *Bergsonism*, and Bliss Cua Lim’s *Translating Time*, which stages a thorough investigation of Bergson’s theories of memory.

<sup>5</sup> Works consulted and/or cited include neuropsychologist Sallie Baxendale’s “Memories Aren’t Made of This: Amnesia at the Movies,” Christine N. Smith et al’s “Losing Memories Overnight: A Unique Form of Human Amnesia,” and multiple works by psychologist Sherry Turkle.

<sup>6</sup> Kilbourn, 139.

the stakes of this thesis are served best by a focus on how the film regards differently memories stored in either subconscious embodied memory or technologically mediated memory.

Furthermore, since many of the key characteristics associated with the digital address the seemingly infinite storage abilities and documentary recording capacities facilitated by ubiquitous networked computing, narrowing our attention to the storage function of memory in *50 First Dates* is especially relevant to the dialogue I construct between the film's bifurcated model of memory and contemporary cultural concerns around the perils of life in the digital age.

From a certain perspective, the term 'technology' has somewhat lost its power as a meaningful categorization. Writing in 1997, historian David Rooney asserts that scholarly lamentation over the term's lack of precision "elicits no useful insights for those in pursuit of an understanding of the role of technology in society."<sup>7</sup> Instead, Rooney views the "necessary complexity"<sup>8</sup> of any effort to carve out a definition of technology as a marker of the term's strength and potential. He explains that the Greek root of technology, *techné*, as well as Max Weber's use of the German *technik*, stretch to encompass both material devices and practical knowledge or techniques.<sup>9</sup> By rehearsing the long etymological history of technology, Rooney demonstrates the extent to which the term has perhaps always accommodated a cluster of diverging and overlapping functions. Following from Rooney, while when I discuss 'technologically mediated memory' I am referring principally to higher-tech devices such as video cameras and laptop computers, it is important for me to maintain a certain degree of categorical flexibility. Thus within 'technologically mediated memory' I also include 'gadgets' along the analog/digital spectrum so long as they facilitate the externalization or mediatization of

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<sup>7</sup> Rooney, 399.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Rooney, 400.

what is otherwise understood to be ‘natural’ human memory. This is to say that I understand the ‘technologicality’ of these mediating gadgets to be a difference of degree, not necessarily of kind. For the sake of clarity, when I make reference to more stubbornly analog objects, I favour the perhaps even broader descriptor, ‘material culture.’ Such an approach takes its cue from Daniel Miller’s 2010 book *Stuff* in which the cultural anthropologist conducts a symptomatic reading of our ‘stuff’ – that is, the world of objects created by humanity that includes anything from clothing to coffins and fizzy drinks. Challenging what he views to be a lack of critical scholarly attention to material culture, Miller extrapolates from our relationships with stuff in order to reach insights about how these relationships structure our social worlds. In a similar vein, my analysis of analog/digital technologies and material culture more broadly aims to take seriously our quotidian relationships with the stuff of memory mediation.

In addition to Miller’s anthropological approach, my understanding and analysis of the stuff of technologically mediated memory is shaped by Bill Brown’s seminal work on “Thing Theory,” in which he argues:

“We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: [...] when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.”<sup>10</sup>

Following from Brown, I take the opportunity provided by *50 First Dates* to confront memory at the point of breakdown – it is in this sense that amnesia accommodates an investigation of memory’s complex working relationship with technology. In other words, when in the film

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<sup>10</sup> Brown, 4.

memory ceases to function as it should, it reveals perhaps more readily its assumed underlying structure, which I will argue is constituted by the dyadic model of memory outlined above.

Finally, it is necessary to outline briefly how I will proceed to discuss the ways in which a model of subconscious embodied memory and/or technologically mediated memory (re)structures understandings of ‘intimacy.’ The notion of intimacy is important to this project because, after all, *50 First Dates* – not to mention several other amnesia films cited throughout – deals with amnesia within the context of an intimate romantic relationship. In actuality, the film is concerned with the technological substitution of Lucy’s memory only insofar as it facilitates her loving relationship with Henry. Beyond narrative content, intimacy is also the dimension of interpersonal human relationships that is commonly understood to be most vulnerable to the antagonistic thrusts of the digital age. Indeed, when Turkle claims that we expect more from technology and less from each other, the traumatic ceding of ‘human’ territory to the digital is measured in terms of intimacy. To be human in such conversations appears to mean being a subject who can and does form intimate relationships with others. This is to say that when we talk about the human in the digital age, it is important to remember that we are always already talking about intimacy. Dominic Pettman’s *Love and Other Technologies: Refitting Eros for the Information Age* provides a useful model here. Through his focus on the triangulation of love, technology, and community, Pettman works to reveal and contribute to some of the underdeveloped areas of discourses around the profound role of technology in contemporary life. He contends, “current conceptions of love and community are hampered by our neglect of a third term, namely, technology.”<sup>11</sup> Pettman draws attention to the perhaps underexplored ways in which contemporary understandings of human community shift beneath the lens of modern

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<sup>11</sup> Pettman, 15.

technological life. Informed by Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of "being singular plural"<sup>12</sup> in which we emerge as subjects not before but *through* the encounter with the other, Pettman makes a case for love as a technology of belonging. Though Pettman's conception of 'technology' is obviously more philosophical than my operationalization of the term, he enriches this assumption of a kind of basic plurality by considering how digital technologies and popular media complicate such understandings. In other words, Pettman historicizes what can tend to be ahistorical and acultural models of community, or 'intimacy' for my purposes. My efforts to account for the cultural and technological specificities of the representation of amnesia in *50 First Dates* similarly insists on the profound role technology plays in shaping understandings of what it means to be human in the digital age.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to pull together discourses around memory, technology, and intimacy in the digital age, it is necessary to call upon work from a diverse set of scholarly communities. Consequently, this thesis draws from the fields of film and cultural studies, philosophy, video game studies, cybernetics, psychoanalytic theory, neuropsychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, and even paleoanthropology. Additionally, I seek to provide an enriched contextual background beyond academe by including popular news articles and situating my case study within a broader history of popular Hollywood amnesia films. Since my object of analysis is a Hollywood rom-com and I am conducting a culturally symptomatic reading of the film, it follows that my claims and their supporting scholarship are from and limited to a particular

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<sup>12</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, Trans. Robert D Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

Western perspective. In other words, I do not suggest that the conclusions I draw from the following analysis are generalizable to a kind of global experience of digital modernity; while transcultural interventions into the bifurcated model of memory outlined in this thesis merit attention, they are beyond the scope of this project. That being said, by placing a body of diverse scholarly and popular perspectives in dialogue, I endeavour to cultivate a necessarily complex discursive context in which to stage my analysis.

In addition to the scholars mentioned in the ‘Terms of Use’ section, it is important to note the array of interdisciplinary scholarship from which this thesis takes its cue. Beyond more contemporary resources, my research is shaped by Frances Yates’ thorough investigation of memory before the advent of the printing press that connects the ‘art of memory’ to the history of Western culture writ large – from ancient Greek rhetoricians, to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and into the seventeenth century. Yates’ work on how the art of memory came to be connected to certain conceptions of the soul in the Middle Ages is particularly relevant to my theorization of subconscious embodied memory and its connection to a kind of essential truth of one’s identity, which we may read as an implicit analog to the soul. By emphasizing how the art of memory has been called upon to perform different cultural work Yates provides valuable background for my thinking on the nexus of memory and technology in a more contemporary context.

More recently, scholars such as Russell J.A. Kilbourn and José van Dijck have conducted essential and historically specific work on the critical interstices of memory and technology. Kilbourn’s book on the intersections of cinema, memory, and modernity has been a valuable



resource throughout the foundational and final stages of this thesis.<sup>13</sup> In an expansive transnational study of mainstream Hollywood films and art cinema, he both analyses the content of cinematic representations of memory and theorizes cinema itself as a formal reflection on the human experience of the passage of time. Kilbourn proceeds from the well-studied understanding that:

“memory today derives its primary meaning, its existence as such, from visually based technologies like cinema; that cinema is not merely one of the most effective metaphors for memory but that cinema – alongside photography – is *constitutive* of memory in its deepest and most meaningful sense.”<sup>14</sup>

Insofar as Kilbourn’s focus is more specifically on the transitional period of late modernity that precedes the explosion of digital and ‘new media’ studies, his work provides a useful model and informs significantly the analysis undertaken in this thesis. Indeed, through his symptomatic reading of the vicissitudes of memory in modern cinema, Kilbourn offers a rigorous and comprehensive update to Yates’ ‘art of memory’ for the age of technology. Elsewhere, Van Dijck ascribes to a “reconsolidation” theory of memory that rejects the possibility of completely separating memory from the technologies used to mediate it, thereby understanding memories as “manifestations of a complex interaction between brain, material objects, and the cultural matrix from which they arise.”<sup>15</sup> Van Dijck’s book on the issue of mediated memory works through both analog and digital memory objects in spheres of personal intimacy, linking these emergent memory processes to the broader slippages of private and public in the digital age. Since this

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<sup>13</sup> See Kilbourn, *Cinema, Memory, Modernity: The Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema*.

<sup>14</sup> Kilbourn, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Van Dijck, *Mediated Memories*, 28.

thesis investigates the gesture towards an other that is always already embedded in the technological mediation of memory, it is necessary to consider the work of scholars who query the extent to which digital technologies have redrawn the boundaries between the intimate spaces of memory and the public sphere.

In line with van Dijck, Andrew Hoskins also insists on the transformative power of technology in memory processes, his concept of “digital network memory”<sup>16</sup> has helped to inform my work on the particularities of a kind of cyborgian model of memory in the digital age. Hoskins asserts that digital network memory, which aligns somewhat with the logical extreme of my conception of technologically mediated memory, describes a scenario in which “communications in themselves dynamically add to, alter, and erase, a kind of living archival memory.”<sup>17</sup> It follows that Hoskins’ emphasis on a moment of significant cultural shift in terms of how we understand and engage in memory processes reverberates in my study of the implications of the participatory turn in memory processes in the age of the Internet.

In 2004, the proliferation of amnesia films such as *50 First Dates* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* prompted clinical neuropsychologist Sallie Baxendale to write about the representation of amnesia in popular cinema. Baxendale explains:

“The most commonly agreed features of organic amnesic syndromes include normal intelligence and attention span, with severe and permanent difficulties in taking in new information. Personality and identity are unaffected. These distinctions, which in a medical setting are critical [...], are often blurred at the movies.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hoskins, “Digital Network Memory,” 92.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Baxendale, 1480.

Baxendale is principally concerned with what, in her professional opinion, is a chronic trend of misinformation about amnesia in popular films, which is an issue that lies beyond the scope of this thesis. Baxendale is useful, however, insofar as she emphasizes that amnesia has been used as a sensational plot device since around 1915 with Jack Pratt's *Garden of Lies*.<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that amnesia films have remained relatively static over time. Indeed, I argue that this is categorically not the case; the particular cultural concerns around the status of human memory in the digital age inflect the representation of memory in contemporary cinema. These cultural concerns tend to orbit around a certain uneasiness with the extent to which we have come to rely on technological devices in our quotidian lives. Jonathan Crary's work on the status of sleep in a lifeworld circumscribed by virtually ceaseless capitalist labour and consumption speaks rather directly to this uneasiness. Crary's phrasing on the current state of affairs is worth recalling at length:

“Now the brevity of the interlude before a high-tech product literally becomes garbage requires two contradictory attitudes to coexist: on one hand, the initial need and/or desire for the product, but, on the other, an affirmative identification with the process of inexorable cancellation and replacement. The acceleration of novelty production is a disabling of collective memory, and it means that the evaporation of historical knowledge no longer has to be implemented from the top down. The conditions of communication and information access on an everyday level ensure the systematic erasure of the past as part of the fantasmatic construction of the present.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Crary, 45.

It is important to note here that Crary's lament essentially describes a condition of mass cultural amnesia as a result of the imperative of obsolescence in the digital age. The technological dark ages are thus figured in amnesiac terms and our ability to remember becomes tantamount to our ability to resist the ideological forces that govern our lives. To narrow Crary's broader and overtly political critique, the pervasiveness of filmic representations of amnesia within romantic relationships that Baxendale identifies – particularly seeing as such representations are often misrepresentations – leads us to ask certain questions around the ubiquitous comingling of memory and intimacy. Why is amnesia so often lodged between a romantic couple as an obstacle that must be overcome if love is to be achieved? What might this popular scenario suggest about the significance of memory in our responses to the various threats of the digital age?

## **METHODOLOGY**

As indicated in the literature review above, this project necessarily draws from many different scholarly fields. It is worthwhile here to recognize a selection of resources that are especially foundational to my argument. In Chapter I, Jack Halberstam's analysis of the gender dynamics and colonial impulses behind *50 First Dates*' representation of amnesia informs my own analysis of how the film similarly literalizes the analog through its representation of Hawaii and Alaska as post- and pre-colonial spaces, respectively. Elsewhere, Mary Anne Doane's work on indexicality provides much of the theoretical scaffolding for my textual analysis, though her work appears in important moments in Chapter II as well. In particular, Doane's link between two definitions of the index – that is, as trace versus deixis – and medium specificity is critical to my analysis of *50 First Dates*' nostalgic privileging of analog technologies versus higher tech digital technologies to do the work of memory itself. Since Doane stages her argumentation

within cinema studies, her work is especially well suited to my study of the articulation of these issues in both *50 First Dates* as well as the video-within-the-film. Additionally, Thomas Elsaesser's explanation of a pervasive popular belief in the powerful role cinema plays in modern subject formation – specifically how films may continue to 'haunt' us long after viewing – informs my analysis of how media is used, with varying degrees of success, to substitute Lucy's lost memory.

Chapter II relies principally on Kaja Silverman's work, apropos of Roland Barthes, on the female voice and authorial subjectivity. Taking her cue from Barthes' proclamation of the death of the author in modernity and the subsequent emergence of a certain authorial 'figure' in the body of the text, Silverman theorizes an authorial subject position that is also indelibly female. Since a key focus of this second chapter is the extent to which the technological mediation of Lucy's memory opens it up to the motivations of other 'authors,' Silverman's emphasis on a model of specifically female authorship is placed productively in dialogue with my investigation of how the film variably allows or refuses Lucy's 'authorial authority' via analog and digital technologies. Also central to the project of Chapter II is Elsaesser's work on both the powerful role of cinema in understandings of mind and body in "Cinema as Brain – Mind and Body," co-authored by Malte Hagener, and the status of new media technologies in psychoanalytic understandings of 'writing' and memory in "Freud as Media Theorist: Mystic Writing-Pads and the Matter of Memory." Elsaesser and Hagener are especially helpful insofar as they yoke together a pervasive belief in cinema's role in modern subject formation and the realm of film censorship with its corresponding relationship to a moralizing economy of taste. I mobilize Elsaesser and Hagener's characterization of the exploitable potential for control embedded in this supposedly formative power of cinema in order to corroborate my assertion

that memory plays an important role in the constitution of authorial subjectivity. In the second case, Elsaesser argues that Freud's focus on the human body/psyche as a *technical* medium is indicative of a broader, and culturally conservative, push to protect an embodied and gendered imagination of the human in an increasingly technological age. Since *subconscious* embodied memory constitutes one half of my dyadic model of memory, the link Elsaesser draws between conceptions of the human subconscious and a certain anxiety around "disembodiment, mechanization, [...] and automation"<sup>21</sup> helps to shape my analysis of a similar protective impulse that persists in the digital age.

Ultimately, if a key concern of the digital age is the deterioration of our memory – as I contend it is – it follows that representations of amnesia offer the potential for insight into our understanding of the status of human memory in a technological era. Indeed, amnesia as the result of head constitutes a perhaps more seemingly manageable literalization of a much broader cultural anxiety around the ground human memory stands to lose with the ascension of technology in the digital age. Moreover, since intimacy seems to be somehow uniquely threatened by the decline of human memory in a technological age, representations of the phenomenon of amnesia within romantic relationships also lends itself to my analysis of our assumptions about the both collaborative and potentially antagonistic functions of memory and love. Thus *50 First Dates*, insofar as it stages the convergence of the three key dimensions of this thesis – that is, memory, technology, and intimacy – functions as a valuable case study with which to work through a historically and technologically contingent model of modern memory.

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<sup>21</sup> Elsaesser, "Freud," 105.

Chapter I

**The Eternal Sunshine of Lucy's Mind:  
A Bifurcated Model of Modern Memory**

*50 First Dates* complicates an otherwise conventional romantic comedy narrative with a novel (and medically impossible)<sup>22</sup> case of amnesia. Henry (Adam Sandler) is the roguish veterinarian at a Hawaiian marine wildlife park who hopes to sail his ramshackle boat solo to Alaska one day to study the relatively understudied underwater life of walruses. As a rule, Henry limits himself to casual flings with tourists in order to avoid any commitments that could interfere with his future travels. However, Henry's plans are interrupted when a broken sail leads him to the Huki Lau Café where he encounters Lucy (Drew Barrymore) who, as an island local, would be typically off-limits. What would have been a standard meet-cute in industry parlance is unsettled by Lucy's short-term memory condition resulting from a brain injury she sustained in a car crash one year earlier. Lucy is unable to consolidate new memories overnight and thus awakens every day believing it is the same morning of her accident. At first blush, Lucy is the eternally unattached one night stand of Henry's dreams; it seems sensible to assume that long term commitment is basically inconceivable for someone who cannot retain new memories. To cope with the condition, Lucy's father, brother, and even the staff at the Huki Lau Café go to great lengths to maintain Lucy's reality and convince her that no time has passed. It is perhaps unsurprising then that Henry makes an unwelcome and disruptive entry into Lucy's meticulously constructed and highly supervised life. Once Henry is banished from betting with the cook at the Huki Lau Café as to whether he can convince Lucy to have breakfast with him each morning, Henry tries his best to 'meet' Lucy elsewhere, staging elaborate scenarios on the side of the highway she drives every day. Lucy's father, Marlin (Blake Clark), and brother, Doug (Sean Astin) inevitably learn of Henry's activities and question his intentions. Nonetheless, because

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<sup>22</sup> See conclusion for discussion of an exceptional documented case of amnesia with explicit ties to *50 First Dates*.



Marlin figures that Lucy only sings on the days she meets Henry, Henry is ultimately able to convince them that their interactions are relatively harmless. As Henry's feelings for Lucy begin to deepen, he creates a videotape meant to inform her of her memory condition and the notable world events she has missed in the past year, including a reenactment of their first meeting(s) in the Huki Lau Café. Henry's video appears to be a great success as Lucy continues to watch some version of it – even recording some footage herself – every morning. The video allows Lucy to reconnect with old friends and also puts a stop to the elaborate routine previously required to protect her from the truth of her condition. More importantly, the video also functions to accelerate Lucy's relationship with Henry as any romantic feelings she experiences are reinforced by the 'evidence' in the video. The narrative progresses rather smoothly from here until Lucy decides to end the relationship. What follows is a complex 'deletion' of Henry from Lucy's technologically mediated memory, a period of separation during which Lucy lives at a psychiatric institute, and eventually a reunion of the romantic couple aided by Lucy's father.

On the whole, *50 First Dates* privileges the role of analog technologies in memory processes and demonstrates a certain affection for the lo-fi. This chapter seeks to illustrate how the film configures the relationship between memory and technology. While films such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, released in the same year as *50 First Dates*, adopt a kind of DIY-sci-fi aesthetic in order to prod at contemporary anxieties about the status of memory and intimate relationships in the age of technology, *50 First Dates* is disinterested in the eerier potential futures of technology in this vein. The more recent 2014 thriller, *Before I Go to Sleep*, examines the inherent dangers and easy manipulation in a similar case of overnight Groundhog-Day-style amnesia, while such anxieties are at best implicit in *50 First Dates*. The rom-com chooses instead to pit numerous technologies (with both analog and digital leanings) against each

other in a grand effort to overcome Lucy's peculiar case of amnesia. As Henry and Lucy pursue their relationship, they employ various strategies (and various technologies) with sporadic success in order to create a kind of ongoing substitute memory for Lucy. Between painting, handicrafts, and diary writing towards the analog end of the spectrum and amateur home video cameras and laptop computers towards the digital, a key difference in efficacy emerges. Specifically, the film regards analog technologies, constructed as somehow closer to the body, as more trustworthy accounts of memory. As Kilbourn notes in his analysis of the representation of memory in *Eternal Sunshine*, "the point of all the 'retro'-technology [...] is that cassette tapes, photographs, notebooks and other 'analog' objects [...] have had time [...] to become naturalized as artificial memory devices; *aides de memoires*, charged – 'cathected' (to use Freud's term) – with affective value."<sup>23</sup> It is this naturalization Kilbourn describes that draws analog technologies closer the realm of the human (and transposes whatever credibility may follow). Digital technologies, on the other hand, are regarded as newer and perhaps even more resistant to 'naturalization' in this way. The implication here is that there is greater potential for manipulation with the use of digital technologies. Several examples of this logic will be investigated in further detail below, beginning with the film's visualization of the analog through representation of place, then Marlin and Doug's makeshift efforts, Henry's video composition, the digitization of Lucy's diary, and finally Lucy's portraits of Henry even after he has been 'deleted' from her diary.

## **VISUALIZING THE ANALOG THROUGH PLACE**

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<sup>23</sup> Kilbourn, 132.

The two key locales of *50 First Dates* illustrate the film's presentation of memory as a conquerable territory. Firstly, the Hawaiian island on which the majority of the film is set functions as an exotic site of forgetting that is always already amnesiac – what representation there is of native Hawaiian heritage seems to work largely in service of the tourism industry while obfuscating colonial histories.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, the vast arctic icescape of Alaska appears to literalize the tabula rasa model of memory put forth by the film in general and Lucy's rare condition specifically. To begin discussion of Hawaii, scholars such as Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder,<sup>25</sup> Jack Halberstam, Lisa Kahaleole Hall,<sup>26</sup> and Houston Wood have noted how Hawaii tends to be scrubbed clean of its colonial past. Wood recalls a *New York Times* review of the 1966 Elvis vehicle, *Paradise, Hawaiian Style*, in order to emphasize how public audiences were growing canny to the portrayal of Hawaii as a kind of “tropical Disneyland.”<sup>27</sup> Such a phrase is particularly apt insofar as it weds two apparently contradictory elements of Hawaii's appeal; Hawaii is a headily exotic ‘other’ space just as it is simultaneously sanitized, its danger mitigated precisely because while it is *of* the other, it does not *belong to* the other. *50 First Dates* is hardly sensitive in its portrayal of indigenous Hawaiians – Rob Schneider's feckless Ula is a rather discouraging mess of cultural stereotypes. Ula's characterization as a lazy, licentious, and eternally shirtless wayward ‘wingman’ corresponds with what Wood identifies as the colonialist preoccupation with a “rhetoric of debasement” that pervades in

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<sup>24</sup> Bacchilega notes that Hawaii's colonial history, though not necessarily sudden and violent, is punctuated by Hawaii's forceful annexation to the U.S. at the end of the Nineteenth Century and the proceeding, and in many ways already-begun, process of Americanization (3-4).

<sup>25</sup> See Borgerson and Schroeder, “The Lure of Paradise: Marketing the Retro-Escape of Hawaii,” *Time, Space, and the Market: Retrosapes Rising*, Eds. Stephen Brown and John F. Sherry, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003, 219-252.

<sup>26</sup> See Hall, “Strategies of Erasure: U.S. Colonialism and Native Hawaiian Feminism,” *American Quarterly* 60.2 (2008): 273-280.

<sup>27</sup> Wood, 112.

narratives with a Hawaiian locale.<sup>28</sup> The film repeatedly aligns Ula with a vague sense of native Hawaiian identity; in one exemplary scene, Ula functions as something of a madcap sideshow as he entertains a small group of Lucy's friends at the beach with a 'traditional' hula song and dance in a banana leaf costume. For the most part, Ula embodies a certain 'traditional' Hawaiian imaginary that is subsequently associated with a kind of ill-fittedness for modern life. Indeed, the prevailing joke seems to be that Ula is embarrassingly and eccentrically out of place in modern American Hawaii, violating codes of behaviour in environments like weddings, golf courses, and various other 'indoor' spaces. Thus it becomes clear that the Hawaii of *50 First Dates* descends from a troubling lineage of media representations<sup>29</sup> of the state as an artificial 'getaway' destination with a rather ambivalent relationship to modernity. Ultimately, Hawaii's sunny (dis)position outside of an imagined American modernity amounts to a kind of dislocating confusion that describes both the result and the necessary preconditions of its colonial amnesia onscreen.

How does such a depiction of Hawaii function specifically for *50 First Dates*? Halberstam argues, "*50 First Dates* utilizes Hawaii as a kind of blank slate, a place emptied of political turmoil and a perfect metaphor for the state of mind produced by the erasure of memory."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the erasure of Hawaii's colonial history literalizes the kind of eternal sunshine of Lucy's mind. This is only compounded by the film's tendency to disregard the more troubling implications of Lucy's vulnerability as a person whose most intimate personal history is in many

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<sup>28</sup> Wood, 109-110.

<sup>29</sup> Other examples include *The Descendants* (Payne, 2011), *Waikiki Wedding* (Tuttle, 1937), *Blue Hawaii* (Taurog, 1961), and the particularly discouraging missionary-colonial narrative of *Hawaii* (Hill, 1966), adapted from James A. Michener's novel of the same name, which constructs American Christian missionaries as a civilizing force against the threatening wildness of Hawaiian natives.

<sup>30</sup> Jack Halberstam, 76.

ways authored by Henry, who obviously has a vested interest in a particular interpretation of events. Moreover, in the most practical terms, the island's rather unchangingly warm climate helps to mitigate the risk of Lucy noticing that an extraordinary amount of time has passed, seemingly overnight. The island is rendered almost perpetually soaked in sugary orange and pink sunlight, achieving a humidly heady atmosphere. The opening montage of *50 First Dates* foregrounds this particular imagination of Hawaii as an intoxicating and beautiful place in which modern subjects can convalesce from the trauma of modern life.<sup>31</sup> The title credits flicker wetly like a mirage over the image of a beachside sunset as Hawaiian steel guitar music washes over the scene. As the camera pans to the right to focus on a pineapple nestled in the sand, the beach scene is replaced by the same pineapple sitting on the counter of a suburban kitchen in which a young woman describes her dalliance with Henry to her companion. Through a large window we can see that snow is falling outside – clearly, we are no longer in paradise. What follows is a compilation of women (although Kevin James makes a brief cameo for a gag as yet another of Henry's vacationing conquests) who have returned home from their Hawaiian vacations and their romantic escapades with Henry. The anecdotes are edited together quite rapidly such that the women finish each other's sentences, drawing attention to both the trivial differences between otherwise generic weeklong romances and the hectic speed of city life in the 'modern' U.S. The women of Henry's past appear mostly in their places of work – a morgue, dentist's office, beauty salon, generic office cubicles, etc. – surrounded by technological devices. Some relate their vacation fling with Henry to their co-workers, but many others are depicted talking on cellphones while going about their workday. Importantly, each woman is framed in a

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<sup>31</sup> The more recent *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (Stoller, 2008) is premised on such an understanding of the "Aloha State."

decidedly technological, or at least vaguely artificial, environment. One woman working in a morgue chats on her cellphone as she uses a bone saw on the cadaver lying in front of her; there is a certain detachment from the task at hand that, while playing for laughs, consistently aligns modern urban life with a kind of alienation from the ‘natural’ world. In contrast to the decidedly urban, indoor, and concrete continental U.S., the women describe participating in adventurous outdoor activities such as scuba diving, hiking, and mountain climbing with Henry. Consistently, *50 First Dates* insists on a kind of essential difference between the continental U.S. and its island cousin. There is little sense that island life is particularly ‘technological.’ As discussed above, a vague sense of ‘modern life’ is repeatedly contrasted with an alternatively slower, simpler way of life in Hawaii. The film’s prologue makes this opposition abundantly clear – this is in addition to the subsequent foregrounding of Henry’s anxious desire to escape modern life and the threat of domestication posed by the prospect of a committed relationship. The fact that Henry’s Alaskan research voyage loiters in the background of this anxiety, standing in for the possibility of escape, will be explored in greater detail below. For now, it is important to emphasize that Henry’s Hawaiian lifeworld is circumscribed by expansive shots of open-air tropical paradise; it is a world of luaus, tikki bars, lush golf greens, and general leisure. Ultimately, in contrast to the Edenic naturalism of the Hawaii of *50 First Dates*, the film’s urban U.S. is rendered in decidedly modern, technological, and almost claustrophobic terms. Hawaii thus becomes a stand-in for the analog while modern continental U.S. aligns itself with the ascension of technology in the digital age.

The representation of Alaska in *50 First Dates*, though ultimately similar in function, differs importantly from the film’s portrayal of Hawaii. Whereas Hawaii is saturated in candy-coloured sunlight, connoting a kind of fertile richness and kinetic energy, Alaska is starkly white and

peacefully still. As far as the film is concerned, Alaska is a kind of uncharted territory waiting to be discovered, populated only by the walruses Henry seeks to study – and even the walruses’ underwater life is relatively unknown. Henry’s journey to Alaska also bears a certain allegiance to gentleman-explorer narratives and settler-colonial histories of the U.S. Indeed, as Susan Kollin explains, “considered one of the world’s only remaining wilderness areas and one of its most popular tourist destinations, Alaska has been widely regarded as the ‘Last Frontier,’ a region whose history has yet to be written and whose ‘virgin lands’ have yet to be explored.”<sup>32</sup> *50 First Dates* certainly participates in such an imagination of Alaska. The spectacularly vast whiteness of the icy landscape, highlighted in the film by sweeping high-angle shots, depicts the region quite literally as a blank slate, recalling the figurative description of Lucy’s memory that is repeated throughout the film. The supposed unspoiled ‘naturalness’ of the region, at least as presented in the film, furthers this association of Alaska with a kind of original neutrality, an innocent amenability to the powers of human and technological domination. This is precisely the kinship between the characterization of Alaska and the ‘blank slate’ model of Lucy’s memory, which casts Henry’s authorial intervention as an almost charitable act of service. Lucy, quite literally, lives in the past; it is precisely through (re)writing Lucy’s history in the compilation video that Henry endeavours to bring her into the present. The implication is that Henry works to ‘fill in the blanks’ that would otherwise remain empty, or perhaps more correctly, *inaccessible* to him. Furthermore, Kollin’s emphasis on Alaska’s supposedly ‘unwritten’ history lends itself well to an analysis of *50 First Dates*; Henry acts as something of an amateur author and archivist, sometimes quite literally writing Lucy’s personal history on her behalf. Accordingly, Henry’s performance as a ‘memory author’ is imbricated with certain colonialist impulses that work to

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<sup>32</sup> Kollin, 2.

marginalize or erase any pre-existing historical narratives, all while positioning the ‘gentleman-explorer’ as a paternalistic pioneer figure who generously brings history to the ‘blank slate.’ Just as the film situates Hawaii outside of the modern technologized world, there is also a sense that the technological age has yet to arrive in Alaska, though perhaps Henry could be the one to bring it. Ultimately, for *50 First Dates*, Alaska stands in for both an escape from modern life and the untapped potentiality of ‘blank slates’ – that is, precisely the appealing duality of colonialism.

### **DIY GROUNDHOG DAY**

*50 First Dates* foregrounds the centrality of material culture and technology to the construction and maintenance of Lucy’s inner life. We learn early on that Lucy’s father and brother, along with Sue and Nick at the Huki Lau Café, enable her to effectively relive the day of her accident every day. Since Lucy is not confined to the family home, certain efforts are required to ensure Lucy’s surroundings do not contradict her assumption that she is living a normal day more than a year ago. The ruse is maintained principally through consistency of her material conditions, particularly the objects and media that populate her daily life. Indeed, the film demonstrates the delicacy of Lucy’s illusory lifeworld when, to her disbelief, a policeman issues her a ticket for an expired license plate and she manages to find a newspaper reflecting the actual calendar date. From a certain perspective, it is material culture that poses the greatest threat to Lucy’s equilibrium. It is perhaps unsurprising then that Lucy’s father procured hundreds of copies of the morning newspaper from the day of her accident for Lucy to read. The family even celebrates Marlin’s birthday every evening complete with a cake that Lucy bakes each time. To avoid having to repeat the fateful drive to pick a pineapple that was their father-daughter tradition on Marlin’s birthday, they keep a large padlocked freezer full of pineapples to defrost



overnight. Marlin and Doug even whitewash the large walls of the workshop every night so that Lucy can paint her father a mural for his birthday every day – and presumably not be alarmed by a mural she has no recollection of painting. In a montage depicting these and other memory-managing tactics, Marlin and Doug begin painting over Lucy’s latest mural and the camera reverses to position itself against the wall. As the men push the white rollers upwards, the paint blacks out the screen in slow strokes and the viewer’s position is aligned with Lucy, for whom this ‘black out’ is a permanent reality. Indeed, this moment contains a reverberation of the image of a “slate wiped clean” overnight that is repeated throughout the film by multiple characters describing Lucy’s condition. While Lucy’s slate certainly is ‘wiped clean’ as she sleeps, the success of the next day depends upon this cleaning up of the evidence of the day. This is to say that it is not enough that Lucy forgets overnight – the material traces of her memory must also be artificially ‘forgotten.’

The charade even extends to refilling shampoo bottles with an eyedropper and re-wrapping a VHS copy of *The Sixth Sense*, Lucy’s birthday present for her father. Apparently, they watch the film together most evenings. The family also watches a videotape of the same Vikings’ football game every day. Firstly, the montage sequence depicting these tasks, set cheekily to Paul McCartney’s “Another Day,” efficiently illustrates the elaborate routine Marlin and Doug concocted in order to manage Lucy’s condition. Secondly, it is worth noting that the film communicates the tedium of this arrangement largely through the re-viewing of video. Marlin and Doug complete most of the above tasks with a resigned yet deliberate attitude one would associate with common daily chores, but they are observably distressed when they must watch the Vikings game and *The Sixth Sense*. Re-viewing video in particular demonstrates the difference between the exhausted affective labour of Lucy’s family and her own innocent

entertainment. The implication here is that occupying the position of a viewer demands a certain performance of affect that the more menial tasks of memory management do not. More than a conventional call for spectatorial engagement, Marlin and Doug must perform viewership for Lucy's benefit. Marlin and Doug's exhaustive indulgence in Lucy's predictable suggestion that they watch both the football game and the film reflects the extent to which media (perhaps especially film and television in this case) come to structure and punctuate our memories. In other words, these videos are the seemingly innocuous markers of the passage of time that have become essential milestones of Lucy's day, every day; popular media has become the scaffolding of Lucy's short-term, or rather twenty-four-hour-term, memory. Thus, from the beginning of the film, popular media and technological 'memory' devices (e.g. recorded broadcasts) are brought in to fill the role Lucy's amnesia left vacant. In order to avoid confronting the truth of the matter, Lucy's material surroundings and, importantly, her media environment, must also be made to forget on her behalf.

Such a scenario gestures to the nascent process of externalizing Lucy's memory that intensifies once Henry and, perhaps more significantly, the 'memory video' he makes for her, enters her life. It is precisely this externalization via mediatization of memory that lies at the heart of technophobic paranoia around the status of human memory in the digital age. In his discussion of the specificities of memory in the digital age, Hoskins refers to the externalization of memory facilitated by digital technologies when he contends, "today, memory [...] is less a question of remembering and more a matter of where to look."<sup>33</sup> In addition to demonstrating a certain tendency to focus on memory in terms of storage, here Hoskins points out how the seemingly endless 'archivability' of the digital offers itself as something of a substitute for the

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<sup>33</sup> Hoskins, "The Mediatization of Memory," 29.

human brain's capacity to remember. In the wake of this shifting of responsibility, *50 First Dates* appears to insist on an essential dissonance between the biological human reality of inevitable decay and exhaustion on the one hand, and the tireless repeatability of modern 'recorded' media on the other. It is also important to note that a certain logic from the realm of video games underpins both Lucy's amnesia and her family's efforts to manage the condition. As Warren Buckland notes in his study of the intersections of video games and cinema, one of the most common conventions of video games is "the serialized repetition of actions (to accumulate points and master the rules)."<sup>34</sup> It is through such serialized repetition that Marlin and Doug 'master the rules' of Lucy's lifeworld, maintaining tight authorial control in order to prevent Lucy from discovering the reality of her amnesia. In fact, narratives of 'overnight' amnesia have proliferated in films since the advent of first-person video games in which avatars 'die' only to be immediately reborn and repeat the scenario a virtually unlimited number of times in order to eventually 'get it right.' Mick Jackson's *Clean Slate* (1994) stages a kind of screwball predecessor to *Memento* in which Dana Carvey plays Maurice L. Pogue, an amnesiac detective who must rely on tape recorders and potential imposters in order to solve the mystery of a crime he seems to be caught up in. Able to preserve his progress only through external memory aides, Maurice otherwise starts afresh each morning. As Baxendale notes, *Clean Slate* marked a shift in contemporary amnesia films – that is, the representation of a model of memory loss in which the amnesiac can retain information for twenty-four hours, only to forget it all overnight.<sup>35</sup> The more recent 2014 thriller, *Before I Go to Sleep*, examines the same psychological phenomenon from a different generic perspective. As a result of a traumatic head injury, Christine (Nicole Kidman)

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<sup>34</sup> Buckland, 160.

<sup>35</sup> Baxendale, 1481.

can only remember new information for 24 hours before losing her memory of her life since the early 1990s. By creating a home video diary, Christine begins to both rebuild her memory on her terms and investigate the narrative of her past that her husband (or, rather, the man who claims to be her husband) has constructed for her. While some days Christine gets closer to the truth than others, in an approximation of the multiple lives convention, each morning she must start from scratch. Similarly, Lucy's life at the outset of the film borrows from the video game convention of multiple lives; Marlin and Doug (and later Henry) are able to perfect their routine over time through the daily do-overs afforded by Lucy's amnesia. Marlin admits he is troubled about what will eventually happen once Lucy wakes to find that her face has aged ten years seemingly overnight – undoubtedly a horribly traumatic way to start the day, every day. Here *50 First Dates* encourages us to regard Lucy's life with her father and brother as a kind of quaint, but ultimately flawed temporary solution. As indicated above, such a predicament insists on an unassailable process of bodily decay over time in contrast with the endlessly repeatable, yet ageless, temporal structure common to video games and imagined to describe the digital more generally.<sup>36</sup> This is to say that from the beginning, *50 First Dates* gestures to a kind of ultimate and fundamental impotence of technologically mediated memory, which cannot imitate its 'natural' human counterpart perfectly enough. By detailing the DIY deception Marlin and Doug perform each night, and Lucy's situation at the outset at the outset of the film, I hope to have made a case for the centrality of material culture to the management of Lucy's amnesia. Furthermore, I hope to have begun to sketch out the film's implicit allegiance to a model of 'natural' human memory, or, as we will come to define it, subconscious embodied memory.

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<sup>36</sup> Doane's analysis of the "dream of dematerialization" associated with the digital will be discussed in greater detail below.

## A VIDEO LOVE LETTER

Material culture continues to play a central role both for Lucy's memory condition specifically and for the development of her romantic relationship with Henry, which is the actual focus of the film. After witnessing the disastrous scene in which Lucy accidentally discovers the truth of her condition and its implications for her family, Henry creates a multi-purpose videotape that depicts notable events in the news and popular culture, explains briefly Lucy's memory loss, and demonstrates her connection to Henry by way of a reenactment of their 'first' meeting(s), captured by Ula's children on a home video camera. The video compilation is very much of its time, exploiting many stylized editing 'effects' recognizable from early video editing software such as animated slideshow style transitions, and short lines of text meant to annotate the content on screen. These effects also call attention to a kind of directorial hand, in this case Henry's arrangement of popular news items and more personal stories relating directly to Lucy's life. In a sense, Henry's video adopts the form of a love letter; quite simply, it is addressed explicitly to Lucy from Henry. Through both text and audio-visual recording, Henry's authorial voice becomes a kind of multi-channel iteration. As the Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice" begins to play, titles appear on the screen addressing Lucy by name and assuring her that "everything is going to be ok...but here are some things you missed this year..." These titles continue to punctuate some of the more sensational news stories, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger's election, Martha Stewart's legal troubles, and Snoop Dogg's decision to stop smoking marijuana one month before his decision to start smoking marijuana once again. One such news story plays footage of a baseball game with a headline claiming "Red Sox Win World Series," followed by a quick intertitle reading "just kidding." Here Henry's video acknowledges,

however subtly, how easily such a video could be manipulated. Indeed, the video could conceivably be as deceptive as Marlin and Doug's pre-existing protective routine. Nonetheless, Henry's text in the video ultimately functions to establish the trustworthiness of his own authorial voice. He jokes, but promptly reveals he was "just kidding." It is worth noting that when Lucy sees this first incarnation of the video, she has been unable to contribute any footage of herself or from her perspective; her voice is absented. Perhaps in anticipation of this imbalance, Henry includes in the video brief messages from Sue and Nick; Sue takes the opportunity to assure Lucy that Henry is "okay," acting as a kind of character witness for Henry. Nestled between the compilation of media events and the 'testimonials' of Lucy's longtime family friends, Henry's appeal to Lucy attempts to draw a sense of credibility from these trusted sources. Philosophers such as Žižek have noted how mechanisms of credibility have come to be articulated in the wake of the digital. Žižek asserts, "today, with the new digitalized technologies enabling perfectly faked documentary images, not to mention Virtual Reality, the injunction 'Believe my words (argumentation), not the fascination of your eyes!' is more pertinent than ever."<sup>37</sup> Žižek likens this situation to the viewing experience of a contemporary film that relies significantly on computer-generated-images or 'special effects;' we know what we are seeing is not precisely a filmed or recorded event, yet we opt to immerse ourselves within the diegesis anyway. In viewing Henry's video for the first (of many 'firsts') time, Lucy finds herself in a similar position; she knows how easily such a video could be manipulated or even completely fabricated, to say nothing of the farcical 'reenactment,' yet she chooses to believe a kind of essential truth behind the constructed video – that is, that she and Henry are falling in love. It is Henry's inclusion of the news items mentioned above that playfully prods at this desire for

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<sup>37</sup> Žižek, 324.

credibility, albeit rife with misplaced nostalgia, that is virtually impossible to satisfy in the digital age.

Once the video begins to explain why Lucy cannot remember any of the news events shown onscreen, we are no longer privy to the sounds of the Beach Boys. Instead, the viewer is implicated in Lucy's emotional experience as the camera oscillates between Lucy's tearful face and the video. We hear a crescendo of delicate non-diegetic solo piano, melancholy strings, and sweeping woodwinds. Soon afterwards Henry's voice, coming from the video, rejoins the soundscape as he proceeds to guide Lucy through a reenactment of the day they met. The film seems to propose that it is preferable or somehow less traumatic for Lucy to discover the truth in this way, as a viewer, than the accidental discoveries (such as the expired license plate fiasco) that inevitably occur if she continues living the fantasy Marlin and Doug construct for her. Positioned as a viewer, it as though Lucy is able to achieve a degree of detachment from the story on screen, which is of course intensely personal to her. The substitution and subsequent reintegration of the melodramatic score with the diegetic sound from the video encourages us to regard Lucy's experience of watching the video in distinctly cinematic terms. In this way both Lucy and the viewer are prompted to accept the specific narrative put forth by the video on its own terms, even though it obviously has immense implications for Lucy personally. Put differently, Lucy's (and the viewer's) cinematic experience of Henry's video borrows a kind of persuasiveness from cinematic convention. As Mary Ann Doane reminds us, "it is not as if we believe cinema presents us with 'realistic' representation of objects or people but that [...] it points to and verifies an existence."<sup>38</sup> Of course, here Doane is concerned with the medium specificity of celluloid film and not digital video. Nonetheless, I would argue that, in the context

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<sup>38</sup> Doane, 146.

of *50 First Dates*, this is precisely the function Henry's video is meant to perform; it 'points to and verifies' not just the facts of Lucy's condition, which are difficult to dispute, but the status of his relationship with Lucy, which is almost impossible to prove. Furthermore, the video descends from a lineage of amateur home video connoting private family life, spontaneity, candour, and a kind of truth-telling capability. Pseudo-anthropological in nature, home video purports to depict domestic humans 'in the wild.' As Patricia Zimmermann notes, "in the popular imaginary, home movies are often defined by negation: noncommercial, nonprofessional, unnecessary."<sup>39</sup> It is precisely from such a supposedly uncompromised characterization that Henry's video is meant to gain its credibility. The apparent success of Henry's video in helping Lucy live what is depicted as a fuller, happier life also partakes in a particular understanding of cinema's effectiveness in mental processes. Elsaesser identifies this pervasive view as, "the idea that films are not simply exterior objects whose reception covers a limited time span and which 'disappear,' so to speak, after that, but rather that films, once seen, continue to live in us and can haunt and influence us in much the same manner as past memories or actual experiences."<sup>40</sup> It is worthwhile to pause here in order to consider a rather remarkable realization of Elsaesser's argument that relates directly to *50 First Dates*. While Baxendale maintains, as a clinical neuropsychologist, that an amnesiac condition like Lucy's is unknown to medicine,<sup>41</sup> researchers Christine Smith et al. note a unique case in which a patient, "FL," exhibited a nearly identical form of memory loss. However, researchers actually attribute FL's psychosomatic condition to *50 First Dates*, which was released 15 months before the vehicular accident that supposedly caused her condition.<sup>42</sup> FL

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<sup>39</sup> Zimmerman, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Elsaesser, "Cinema as Brain – Mind and Body," 171.

<sup>41</sup> Baxendale, 1481.

<sup>42</sup> Smith et al, 2838.



admits that Drew Barrymore is her favourite actress and that she has viewed the film several times since the onset of her condition, but insists that she did not see the film before her accident; even so, the researchers involved in her case suggest that FL likely could have had knowledge of the film's premise.<sup>43</sup> Here we encounter a rather extraordinary demonstration of 'cinema's effectiveness,' to recall Elsaesser's phrasing. Despite FL's memory loss, *50 First Dates* continues to haunt her amnesiac present in a way that appears to inform the manifestation of her symptoms. Within the diegesis of *50 First Dates*, it is this 'haunting' function of video, experienced cinematically, that is put to work in the (re)construction of Lucy's subjectivity in the actual present.

The content of the first version of the video described above contrasts with what we see of the final version of the video in the epilogue of *50 First Dates*. In the film's final scene, Lucy awakes to view a version of the video that begins with the news of her accident before a montage of significant personal events informs Lucy (and us) that years have passed since the previous scene and the couple have since married. The particularities of Lucy's situation in the epilogue will be discussed in greater detail below, but for now it is important simply to note that once it is possible for Lucy to participate in the video, by recording and/or appearing in the footage herself, the documentation of media events falls out of the video. This significant discrepancy between the first and final versions of the video underlines the differing strategies of each. In the case of the first video, introduced when Lucy is still living in Hawaii with her family who could potentially confirm or deny the content of the video, Henry works to establish his credibility as the author of Lucy's memory. The final version of the video, however, is no longer preoccupied with establishing Henry's credibility as an author through popular news media or the testimony

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

of Lucy's trusted friends. Instead, Lucy is convinced of her own history through a home video compilation consisting almost entirely of moments from her relationship with Henry. The landscape of Lucy's memory, like that of Alaska, is now isolated from the rest of the world – the video jettisons any other authorial voices that might complicate or even contradict Henry's account of Lucy's memory. Overall, it is clear that the video's material circumstances and Lucy's cinematic viewing experience are central to the video's successful substitution of Lucy's memory. If we understand memory to be a crucial component of subjectivity, it follows that the video becomes not simply an aid for Lucy's daily functioning, but a pillar of her sense of self. It is here that we arrive at the scenario that occupies much of the technophobic paranoia around life in the digital age – that is, when our identities becomes dispersed and we cease to be fully ourselves without our external technological aids. Put differently, Lucy's inevitable dependence on Henry's video, albeit sans a strictly literal fusion of the human body and intelligent machine, stages a version our collective cyborgian nightmare.

The substitution via externalization of Lucy's memory (without actual input from Lucy) represented by Henry's video speaks to broader contemporary cultural anxieties surrounding both the potentiality and the increasing centrality of technological devices to our daily lives. Ten years later, Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland's *Still Alice* (2014), a film that follows from the titular character's diagnosis of early onset Alzheimer's Disease, represents a similar cluster of concerns. Alice (Julianne Moore) is sent into a panic when she cannot find her iPhone, which houses all of her necessary scheduling reminders and, crucially, a list of simple questions she has written for herself to answer each morning, such as "What is the name of your oldest daughter?" In preparation for the decline of her cognitive abilities, Alice orchestrates a series of instructions to be triggered once her future self can no longer answer her daily questions. Not

wishing to continue living past this point, Alice records a video for herself that will guide her through her own suicide. One of the tragedies of the narrative occurs when it becomes clear that Alice's iPhone is lost for good, rendering her virtually powerless as her health and cognitive capacity continue to deteriorate; crucially, with the deterioration of Alice's memory comes the withering away of her identity. The implication here is that once we may no longer choose for ourselves the extent to which our identities are propped up by external technological devices, it may become quite literally a matter of life and death of both the body and soul. Of course, this is an example of dependence upon technologically mediated memory pushed to its logical extreme. Nonetheless, it is useful insofar as it reveals the precarity of such a dependence on technology beyond the technophobic futurism of science fiction. Indeed, *Still Alice*, like *50 First Dates*, insists simultaneously (and rather innocently) on the unassailable and fragile temporality of the human body and its privileged link to a form of memory and an identity that cannot be housed elsewhere, that cannot be preserved through technological mediation.

## **DIGITIZING/DELETING A DIARY**

In an approximation of the higher-tech memory erasure technique represented in films such as the pseudo-medical procedure offered by Lacuna Inc. in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the technologically sophisticated and contractually obligatory erasure in *Paycheck*, and the futuristic military implantation (and later commercial/recreational intervention) depicted in *Total Recall*, *50 First Dates* stages something of an artificial memory erasure well beyond Marlin and Doug's nightly whitewashing. This occurs when Lucy decides to digitize her handwritten diary on a laptop computer in order to remove all memories of Henry, functionally 'un-doing' their relationship. This pivotal scene is relevant to this project in two particular ways, for two related

yet distinct questions we may ask of the film. The first, which I will discuss directly, examines the notions of trace and signature; how does the film understand and represent the faculty of analog versus digital technologies – that is, a handwritten diary versus a laptop – to supplement and document Lucy’s memory? The second extends this logic of credibility in order to investigate the stakes of this scene for questions of authorship; to what extent does the digitization of Lucy’s diary render her most personal memories vulnerable to manipulation by other authorial voices? Tabling the latter question for now, it is important firstly to work through the implications of this scene for our understanding of how analog and digital technologies are made to function in *50 First Dates*.

As mentioned above, at first Henry’s video appears to be a great success. Lucy evidently watches some version of it every morning as she and Henry continue to see each other. It is only later that we learn Lucy has been keeping her own account of events in a diary complete with sketches, pressed flowers, and other mementos from her ‘first’ date(s) with Henry. Lucy tells Henry that relying solely on his videotapes left her feeling, rather appropriately, that she was being told about her life from someone else’s point of view. Eventually, believing that she is holding Henry back from living a full life, Lucy decides that she no longer wishes to continue with the relationship. The film encourages us to read this scene as something of a romantic, if tragic, gesture of love. It is because Lucy loves Henry that she insists on their separation; she views their relationship as a barrier to his plans for an Alaskan research voyage. Having recorded her own experience of daily events in her diary, Lucy asks Henry to read what she wrote about him before helping her delete all traces of their relationship. Significantly, this process of what we might call selective memory consolidation or else selective memory erasure is essentially a

process of *digitization*. Lucy and Henry use a computer to transpose Lucy's analog practice of diary writing into a word document on her laptop.

It is worth lingering on the material conditions of this scene. As a handwritten paper document, Lucy's diary bears an indexical relationship to herself – or, more precisely, to the physical act of writing. The sketches and decorative elements Lucy included in the margins of each page personalize the entries and perform a kind of evidentiary function for Lucy's affective experience of the events beyond alphabetic language. This analog practice of documenting her memories each day contrasts importantly with the subsequent process of digitization. The implication here is that the diary is somehow less true in digital form, or at least its manipulation is virtually undetectable. As Lucy's original diary bears an indexical relationship to her act of writing, the diary acquires an air of credibility that is much more difficult to achieve via digital technologies. As Doane explains, "The index makes that claim [verification of an existence] by virtue of its privileging of contact, of touch, of a physical connection. The digital can make no such claim and, in fact, is defined as its negation [...] a medium without materiality."<sup>44</sup> Here Doane distinguishes two definitions of the index, trace and deixis, apropos of Charles Sanders Peirce. The first definition of the index as trace corresponds to the footprint or the photograph in which "something of the object leaves a legible residue through the medium of touch."<sup>45</sup> As Doane makes clear, this understanding of the index as trace, as a reproduction of a past moment, also foregrounds the linear temporal relationship between the object and the moment it indexes. The second definition of the index as deixis (often forgotten in discourses around photography and film) is exemplified by the pointing finger, or, "the 'this' of language."<sup>46</sup> In this second case,

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<sup>44</sup> Doane, "The Indexical...", 142.

<sup>45</sup> Doane, "The Indexical...", 136.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

the pointing finger embodies what Doane calls a “mandatory emptiness,”<sup>47</sup> *traceless* and meaningful only insofar as it refers backwards to the thing itself. In the case of *50 First Dates*, the film tends to align analog technologies such as Lucy’s handwritten diary with the function of the index as trace, whereas digital technologies such as the laptop computer are associated with the index as deixis. It is this ‘mandatory emptiness’ of Lucy’s digitized diary that challenges its credibility as a source or substitution of Lucy’s memory; for *50 First Dates*, the remoteness of the technology and its trustworthiness are inversely correlated. Here, if one forgives the analogy, we may draw new meaning from the idiom “I trust you as far as I can throw you” – that is, once technological memory devices exceed the bounds of touch, they exceed the bounds of trust.

Doane argues that today, we imagine that the digital has obliterated the notion of a medium and, instead, “we tend to think of a medium as a material or technical means of aesthetic expression (painting, sculpture, photography, film, etc.).”<sup>48</sup> Such an assumption enables what Doane calls “film fetishism” to construct a division between celluloid and the digital “based on a supposedly privileged indexicality to the real, referentiality, and materiality.”<sup>49</sup> This is precisely the logic that underlies the hierarchical organization of technologies along the analog/digital spectrum in *50 First Dates*. Indeed, we tend to believe there is no mechanically indexical relationship between the lettered keys on a computer keyboard and the characters reflected on the computer-generated word document. We could productively even oppose the computer keyboard to the typewriter; for example, the force with which one punches the keys on a typewriter corresponds with the letter produced in ink on the page. The more pronounced kind of self-signature embedded in Lucy’s analog diary is diminished in the process of digitization. The

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Doane, “The Indexical...,” 130.

<sup>49</sup> Doane, “The Indexical...,” 131.

words that were once recognizably her own could conceivably now have come from other authorial sources; indeed, it is Henry and not Lucy who is shown entering the selected passages of Lucy's diary into the computer. Through the phenomenon of amnesia, *50 First Dates* foregrounds the often overlooked centrality of authorship in memory processes. Lisa Gitelman's analysis of player pianos as part of the prehistory of computing illustrates how discourses around the analog versus the digital have long been caught up in a rhetoric of authenticity. She asserts, "the specifics of materiality continue to *matter* much more to authors, to publishers, to 'labels' – that is, to potential owners – than they ever can, could, or will to listeners."<sup>50</sup> Here Gitelman helps to pinpoint the importance of materiality to the technologies used to stand in for Lucy's faulty memory – this is to say, an investment in materiality seems inevitably inflected by a preoccupation with authorship and a certain crisis of authenticity imagined to circumscribe the immateriality of the digital age. Of course, as Doane rightly points out, the alignment of the digital with immateriality on the one hand and the conflation of the analog or indexical (as trace) with referentiality, are more or less equally fantastical.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, *50 First Dates* is emblematic of the persistent popular belief that our ability to exert authorial control over our memories – that is, to act as effective gatekeepers of the content of our mediatized memories – is somehow compromised in the digital domain, no matter who may be authoring on our behalf.

## LUCY'S (SELF-)PORTRAITURE

The film's engagement with analog and digital technologies in terms of their function in memory processes comes to a head in what will be the final scene discussed in this chapter. It is

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<sup>50</sup> Gitelman, 214.

<sup>51</sup> Doane, "The Indexical..." 143.

here that *50 First Dates* articulates most clearly its stakes in two distinct models of memory – that is, subconscious embodied memory aligned with the analog and technologically mediated memory associated with the digital. The scene in question stages Henry and Lucy’s reunion sometime after Lucy ends the relationship and erases Henry from her memory by amending and digitizing her diary. At first it seems that Lucy successfully erased Henry. Subsequent to the deletion via digitization of the diary, Henry glimpses Lucy at the marine park with her class from the institute where she now lives and works as an art teacher. They lock eyes, but it is clear Lucy does not recognize him as her former lover. However, in the film’s penultimate scene we discover that Lucy has been unable to completely eradicate Henry from what we understand to be her subconscious. As Marlin comes to see Henry off on his trip to Alaska, he mentions to Henry that Lucy is doing quite well at the institute and she has even starting singing again. He also gives Henry a Beach Boys cd featuring the classic “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” a meaningful song in Henry and Lucy’s relationship. Not long into Henry’s voyage, as “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” blasts in the background, a brief flashback to Marlin mentioning that Lucy would sing only on the days she met Henry brings him to a realization – evidenced by the fact that Lucy has started singing again – that she remembers him.

It is worth pausing to emphasize the circumstances of Henry’s epiphany that lead to his reunion with Lucy. Lucy’s singing functions as a manifestation of her subconscious embodied memory of Henry; indeed, it is Marlin who makes the connection between Lucy’s encounters with Henry and her singing in the first place while Lucy remains blissfully and tone-deafly unaware. While Lucy was able to erase Henry from her conscious memory by excising him from her diary, it seems she was unable to remove the more elusive connection between her happier experiences with Henry and her joyful a cappella renditions of “Wouldn’t It Be Nice.” Here



Lucy's voice functions as a kind of intangible bridge between her memory and the present. As Mladen Dolar maintains in his investigation of the voice, "[the voice's] positivity is extremely elusive – just the vibrations of air which vanish as soon as they are produced, a pure passing, not something that could be fixed or something that one could hold on to."<sup>52</sup> Dolar's characterization of the voice here is significant insofar as it pinpoints a simultaneous materiality and invisibility; the voice is always something of a non-presence that fleetingly occupies space nonetheless. It is in this sense that the voice becomes a kind of analog technology that is particularly resistant to memory erasure by virtue of its enigmatic connection to the body. In other words, Lucy's singing voice reverberates from her subconscious embodied memory. In Barthes' essay "The Grain of the Voice," he insists on the erotic connection between the voice and the listener by virtue of the bodily traces, or 'grain,' that can identify the speaker (or singer in Lucy's case). To recall Barthes phrasing (albeit in translation), the 'grain' is "the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue; perhaps the letter, almost certainly *significance*."<sup>53</sup> This uniquely identifiable trace of the voice is significant to Lucy's situation because it bears a privileged connection to *her* psyche as opposed to Henry's authorial voice embedded in his past forays into videography. It follows that Lucy's singing voice may be productively understood in terms of the index as trace, apropos of Doane. Indeed, it is through the voice's semi-tactile and immediate relationship to the body that it performs its function of verification. Put differently, Lucy's voice becomes a credible source of memory by way of its essential *bodily* materiality.

Once back on dry land, Henry rushes to the psychiatric institute where Lucy lives and works, but Lucy has no idea who he is. By way of recuperating the thud of this anticlimax, Lucy leads

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<sup>52</sup> Dolar, 36.

<sup>53</sup> Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 182.

Henry to her art studio where paintings, charcoal sketches, a clay bust, and watercolours of Henry's likeness clutter the walls. As the camera glides delicately across the room to reveal dozens of Henry's portraits, it lingers on a larger canvas depicting a man in a Hawaiian shirt with a large cracked egg in place of his head, which is notable beyond its parody of Magritte's "The Son of Man." The resemblance between Adam Sandler's head and an egg is not only a running gag in the film, but also something of an inside joke in Henry and Lucy's relationship. Significantly, even this smaller, more intimate detail has managed to survive in Lucy's subconscious. Inferring from the prolificacy of Lucy's portraiture, this residual memory can be elucidated consistently through artistic practice when it cannot otherwise find expression. Of course, this privileging of analog artistic media also reveals a rather conservative understanding of artistic practice; the film seems to partake in a certain imagination of the artist as a kind of medium herself, a technology that carries out the demands of artistic inspiration often relegated to the unconscious. The implication here is that through their access to the unconscious, analog media such as painting, drawing, and sculpture maintain a profound connection to the model of embodied memory put forth by the film. It is important to emphasize that this embodied memory is also subconscious; although Lucy reveals that she dreams about Henry almost every night, she has no intellectual understanding of who Henry may be nor why this stranger's face appears so frequently in her dreams. Indeed, what she seems to remember is more of an image or essence of Henry than an episodic memory of actual events. Similarly, in *Total Recall*, Hauser's (Arnold Schwarzenegger) memory is erased and a new identity (complete with false memories) is implanted in his brain, yet the film opens within his dreamscape – a dream that draws from his subconscious embodied memory of his actual past life, centered on Melina, his former lover. Paralleling Lucy's miraculous ability to remember Henry's image, it appears that memories of

love resist amnesia by virtue of their location in subconscious embodied memory. Indeed, popular belief in a link between dreams and the subconscious, Freud notwithstanding, encourages us to understand that a remnant of Lucy's memories of Henry persists somewhere in the depths of her subconscious. There is also a certain purity to Lucy's subconscious memory, realized through artistic practice. As noted, the memory that survives is not exactly one of precision, but of essence, perhaps even of love itself; thus, we are led to regard Lucy's surviving memory of Henry as perhaps more *essentially* truthful than even her diary, especially in its digitized form.

We may contrast Lucy's subconscious embodied memory, the power of which is revealed in the film's final moments, with her technologically mediated memory represented by her digitized diary and Henry's videos. *50 First Dates* is clear in its insistence on technologically mediated memory's vulnerability to manipulation; indeed, the film demonstrates how easily Lucy's memory can be manipulated by Henry as well as her father and brother. Conversely, subconscious embodied memory, as exemplified by Lucy's artistically realized memory of Henry, is idealized for its supposed resistance to meddling by other authors. Here *50 First Dates* reflects, perhaps most obviously, its stakes in anxious discourses around the status of human memory in the digital age. As Bruno Latour asserts, modernity insists on an artificial ontological distinction between inanimate objects and human subjects when in actuality, apropos of Michel Serres, "quasi-objects" and "quasi-subjects" proliferate.<sup>54</sup> The bifurcated model of memory that emerges from my analysis of *50 First Dates* is one such example of this stubborn modern affirmation of the essential separation of a 'natural' human state and 'unnatural' technology. While objects and human subjects may have a productive working relationship, so to speak,

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<sup>54</sup> Latour, 10-11.

technologically mediated memory is understood to be fundamentally unable to substitute its ‘natural’ human counterpart. From this perspective, the circumstances surrounding the couple’s reunion in the art studio reaffirm two of the film’s key logics. Firstly, Lucy’s artwork reflects the film’s broader affection for analog technologies by virtue of their greater proximity to subconscious embodied memory. Secondly, the conditions of the couple’s reconciliation literalizes the film’s conceptualization of love as a kind of ultimate and decidedly analog technology of memory – one that resists both amnesia and technological mediation.

## CONCLUSION

Beyond merely privileging the analog in a nostalgic gesture, the hierarchical organization of memory technologies in *50 First Dates* delineates perhaps the most important divisions in the film. By demarcating differences between the analog and digital when it comes to the utility of technology in memory processes, the film also constructs the aforementioned opposition between technologically mediated memory and subconscious embodied memory. *50 First Dates* tends to encourage us to regard the latter as something of a purer register, a position this chapter neither supports nor disputes. What is interesting about the film’s bifurcated view of memory is that analog technologies are shown to be able to access and extract Lucy’s subconscious embodied memory whereas digital technologies are not. Moreover, in the case of subconscious embodied memory, memory itself becomes the more powerful entity – Lucy’s body becomes a kind of medium for the realization of her ‘pure’ memory. In this way the film insists implicitly on an almost mystical importance of subconscious embodied memory that is fundamentally opposed to substitution by the technologically mediated (and primarily digital) alternative. For *50 First Dates*, this imagination of a largely subconscious embodied memory is perhaps the analog par

excellence. As we increasingly live our lives with and through digital technologies in the age of the Internet, *50 First Dates* illustrates a concurrent desire to reassert the virtues of the analog, imagined to be less complicated and suspect, grounded as it is in its material circumstances. Relating to this point, Doane observes a longing for “the certitude of the imprint, the trace, the etching in a medium whose materiality is thinkable,” which “reveals more readily than the digital, with its dream of immateriality, the inescapable necessity of matter, despite its inevitable corrosion, decay, and degeneration.”<sup>55</sup> By detailing *50 First Dates*’ hierarchical taxonomy of analog and digital technologies in this chapter, I hope to have made clear that it is upon this ‘inescapable necessity of matter’ that the film insists.

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<sup>55</sup> Doane, “The Indexical...,” 146.

Chapter II

**My Private Alaska:**

**Memory, Technology, and (Co)Authorship**

Now that we have an understanding of how *50 First Dates* configures the relationship between memory and different sorts of technologies, it is important to consider more precisely the larger implications of the dyadic model of memory represented in the film. Specifically, this chapter seeks to answer the following questions: to what extent does technologically mediated memory open itself up to other authorial voices? If we oppose this model of memory to a kind of subconscious embodied memory, as the film encourages us to, what sort of power dynamics emerge? The question of authorship is central both to the film's engagement with memory and to contemporary anxieties around the status of human memory in a technological age. Indeed, the film offers a valuable prism through which to consider these broader issues by staging the convergence of memory, technology, and authorship. Lucy's memory constitutes the site of this convergence insofar as the technologies used to manage or overcome her amnesia are essentially the technologies of other authors. The previous chapter's examination of the role of these analog and digital technologies in memory processes articulated the significance of their material circumstances, linking their differing relationships to the body to the success of their interventions into Lucy's memory. My emphasis on the perceived trustworthiness of objects such as reprinted newspapers, handwritten diaries, computer-generated documents, and home videos will now be extended to the larger implications of the participatory turn in contemporary memory processes. Here I interrogate the film's engagement with what it means to be the author of our own, or perhaps more importantly, someone else's memory *through* technology. Firstly, this chapter works through the power dynamics of memory authorship as represented by Lucy's ultimate situation in Alaska. Secondly, I discuss the extent to which the authorial body that emerges from a model of subconscious embodied memory is perhaps always already gendered. Next, this chapter examines the significance of sleep both to my analysis of the authorial body in

*50 First Dates* and to sociopolitical anxieties of the digital age. In the fourth section, I consider how the film imagines the figure of an ethical other, an onlooker of memory exemplified by Ula's children, who seem to be constantly recording the events at hand on a video camera in the background. Building from an analysis of Ula's children, this chapter concludes with an investigation of how observation is thematized more broadly in the film. Overall, this chapter aims to explain how the film's representation of the role of technology in memory processes is symptomatic of contemporary cultural concerns over the crisis of authorship in the digital age.

The question of authorship is important to an analysis of *50 First Dates* largely because Lucy's memory condition renders her in an acutely vulnerable position. Her self-determination is possible only to the extent that she may act as the author of her memory, involved in the re-writing of her 'lost time.' While surely Lucy's memory loss necessitates some degree of (re)writing, the film never quite addresses why Lucy herself could not be that author; although at one point we see Lucy filming Henry while she asks him if he loves her, there is never an indication that this footage makes it into the final cut of the video. In fact, as indicated in Chapter I when Lucy decides to cut ties with Henry, she explains that she kept her diary secret because the video left her feeling that she was learning about her life from someone else's point of view. Also mentioned previously with regards to Henry's first video, Elsaesser describes a pervasive notion of cinema's effectiveness – that is, films as not purely external objects, but as components of subject and identity formation.<sup>56</sup> It is worth noting that Elsaesser characterizes such a view as emblematic of film censorship.<sup>57</sup> What is remarkable about Elsaesser's observation for the purposes of this chapter is that it illustrates the connection between control and the powerful role

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<sup>56</sup> Elsaesser, "Cinema as Brain – Mind and Body," 171.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.



of cinema in memory processes. It seems that from the beginning, technological interventions in memory have been regarded opportunistically by those who would like to censor, or otherwise author the content that lives on in, or ‘haunts,’ the mind. This powerful position of the censor finds its analog in Henry who curates and constructs Lucy’s narrative for her to experience as a cinematic viewer. As Henry acknowledges in his first video, when he (re)encounters Lucy at the Huki Lau Café, her reaction to him varies each day – she actually rejects his overtures on many occasions. This variability in Lucy’s acceptance of Henry is ostensibly overcome with the introduction of Henry’s video, as Henry’s narrative of a successful romance supplants Lucy’s misgivings. This power imbalance in the film is compounded by the contrast between Lucy’s concern that she is infringing on Henry’s self-determination and preventing him from embarking on his trip to Alaska and the apparent lack of concern for Lucy’s self-determination throughout the film. The limitation of Lucy’s self-determination by virtue of her restricted access to authorship is illustrated perhaps most obviously in the film’s final moments aboard Henry’s Alaskan research vessel.

### **ALASKA: THE LAST FRONTIER**

The representation of memory as contested ground in *50 First Dates*, vulnerable to the claims of multiple authors, is essentially very much in line with more overtly politicized characterizations of technologically mediated memory in films such as *The Bourne Identity*, *Total Recall*, and *Paycheck*. That being said, where these films position government, military, and/or corporate actors with stakes in the amnesiac’s memory, *50 First Dates* substitutes a patriarchal family structure. The film seems to propose a model for the management – or, as I argue, the authorship – of Lucy’s memory that is the stuff of faerie tales. Lucy’s situation hardly

changes from the beginning of the film to the end; she remains at the mercy of an isolating paternalistic family structure closely resembling the one from which Henry endeavoured to liberate her in the first place. Here Halberstam is correct to point out how it becomes clear that, “the heterosexual conceit of all romantic comedies is revealed here as the misguided belief that in passing from father to husband the woman starts life anew.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, despite Lucy’s ‘fresh start’ with Henry in Alaska, her subjugation (which the film appears to justify through her amnesia) remains relatively static from the family home to her married life at sea. In the beginning, she is isolated, imprisoned by the routine of a single day, relying on the fictions of her father and brother to construct her perception of the ‘real world.’ At the film’s conclusion, Lucy’s isolation is in fact more extreme. The key difference between these two lifeworlds is that Henry’s romantic and sexual relationship with Lucy is nearly impossible in the former, and virtually the only option in the latter. As Halberstam points out, *50 First Dates* flirts with the motif of brainwashing without acknowledging it as such.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps oddly, the height of Lucy’s agency actually coincides with her institutionalization during her separation from Henry. It was in fact Lucy herself who insisted on moving into the psychiatric institute and, according to Marlin, she is actually thriving there. Ostensibly made aware of her condition each day, Lucy teaches an art class to the other patients who also live at the psychiatric institute. We even see her leading a tour through the marine park where Henry works – though of course she regards him, albeit somewhat flirtatiously, as a complete stranger. Perhaps most significantly, at the institute, Lucy is no longer burdened by an injunction to love someone she does not recognize. Indeed, as Halberstam argues, “when Lucy forgets Henry, she forgets patriarchy, heterosexuality,

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<sup>58</sup> Halberstam, 76.

<sup>59</sup> Halberstam, 77.

[and] gender hierarchies.”<sup>60</sup> Halberstam goes on to conclude that, unconsciously, *50 First Dates* accommodates a reading of forgetting as a kind of technology of resistance. Thus we can read the struggles of other authors in/of Lucy’s life to substitute her lost memories also as attempts to suppress her resistance.

Here we may productively compare *50 First Dates* to an earlier film that similarly regards amnesia rather opportunistically, Garry Marshall’s *Overboard* (1987). Dean (Kurt Russell), a carpenter and single father of four boys claims as his ‘wife’ Joanna (Goldie Hawn), a wealthy former client who has fallen overboard her yacht and lost all memory of who she is. In a perhaps strangely extravagant and prolonged act of revenge, Dean manages to convince Joanna, renamed ‘Annie,’ that she is his wife and mother of his children. The tale of unlikely love that follows is imbricated with a re-education of sorts in which Joanna/Annie eventually accepts her role as wife and mother, leaving her materialistic and decidedly non-maternal life of luxury behind her. While, as Halberstam argued, Lucy’s amnesia provides an opportunity to also forget the demands of patriarchy, *Overboard* regards Joanna/Annie’s amnesia as an opportunity to *remember* the same. In the case of *50 First Dates*, the film understands Henry’s refusal to fall properly in monogamous love and start a family as an obstacle to overcome. When Lucy is at her most agentic, living at the institute and teaching her art class, she is effectively preventing Henry from fully realizing his patriarchal role. Indeed, the exceptionality of Lucy’s institutionalization and the agency it affords her is especially apparent when contrasted with her final situation in Alaska. In *Overboard*, of course, it is Joanna/Annie’s refusal to mature into motherhood that poses the problem. Significantly, in both films, the male protagonist’s authorship of the amnesiac woman’s past/identity is presented as a corrective, and perhaps even a healing, measure against

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

the erosion of ‘traditional family values’ in modern life.<sup>61</sup> Here the female body becomes a vehicle for a kind of redemptive rebirth and the realization of the male protagonist’s revisionist history. Put differently, the *amnesiac* female body is cast as a text that lacks resistance to ‘other’ authors. Such an analysis of gender dynamics in these two amnesia films helps to adumbrate the ways in which the bifurcated model of memory is perhaps always already gendered. Referring back to my analysis of the reunion of the romantic couple in Lucy’s art studio in Chapter I, we are reminded how Lucy’s act of authorship, so to speak, is actually the artistic realization of her subconscious embodied memory and *not* a conscious or technical ‘writing’ of a narrative. Subconscious embodied memory is thus conflated with the female body whereas technologically mediated memory is aligned with the patriarchal authorial subject. In other words, the *body* of subconscious embodied memory is that of a woman.

In Alaska, Lucy’s memory is almost hermetically sealed. Indeed, Lucy is now more or less stranded on an arctic expedition with her father, husband, and, perhaps most surprisingly, her young daughter whom she must meet for the first time every day. The rather horrifying notion that Lucy endured some version of this each morning of her pregnancy aside, the scarcity of other people on the expedition means, in effect, there are very few alternative authorial voices for Lucy. In fact, as far as we see, Lucy’s voice still has not made it into her morning memory video – Henry appears to still be the primary author. The video is really all that Lucy has that could contradict the narrative disseminated to her from Henry and her father, though it is likely safe to assume that the video would align with such a narrative. Also gone are the other media,

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<sup>61</sup> Baxendale helps to demonstrate the association of amnesia with this kind of redemptive or corrective fresh start when she observes that cinematic representations tend to favour the trope of originally flawed or malevolent characters who become ‘good people’ after the inception of their amnesia (1481).

newspapers for instance, that could disrupt the familial lifeworld maintained on the Alaskan vessel. Waking in the cabin of Henry's boat, Lucy watches the latest version of her memory videotape, through which both Lucy and the viewer discover simultaneously what has occurred since her reunion with Henry in the art studio; most significantly, Henry and Lucy have married. Upon the video's completion, Lucy draws back the curtain covering the porthole to reveal the ocean scene outside. Here we see a reversal of the film's earlier introductory scene in which the camera plunges into the dolphin tank and through the glass window of Henry's office. This time, the camera pulls away from Lucy's rapt face backwards through the porthole, sweeping upwards to expose the striking image of the boat surrounded by glaciers and icy ocean water. In these visual terms, Lucy is rendered in something of a fishbowl herself, plagued by a memory condition not entirely unlike that of a goldfish. As discussed above, the refulgent whiteness of Alaska delivers the final literalization of the 'blank slate,' and the colonialist impulses evident in the Hawaiian setting are taken to their extreme. Henry is now the head of a pioneering family, adventuring bravely into the Arctic Circle in the noble pursuit of scientific knowledge. Of course, one of the ironies of this final scene is that the supposedly breathtaking natural beauty, signifying a kind of pure potentiality, is quite clearly a computer-generated image. Once again, the naturalized blankness of Alaska, like Hawaii and the terrain of Lucy's memory, reveals itself to be a kind of technologically mediated fiction. It seems that, perhaps accidentally, *50 First Dates* reasserts the potential for manipulation and thus a certain untrustworthiness of digital technology. Overall, the anthropomorphization of the dyadic model of memory discussed above animates a particular nightmare of the digital age. That is, the fear that the erosion of 'human' memory in the digital age, represented in its extreme by the amnesiac subject in virtually all the films discussed in this thesis, somehow disarms us against the interests of other authors.

## THE S/TEXTUAL AUTHORIAL BODY

As emphasized above, Lucy is allowed similarly little self-determination in both her initial situation, living with her father and brother who work to protect her from the truth of her amnesia, and her life with Henry in which she is still encouraged to, or perhaps coerced into, accepting someone else's narrativization of her life. The central problem here is that Lucy is alienated from a mode of memory authorship for herself. If we accept that memory is a crucial force in the formation of subjectivity, it follows that the formation of Lucy's subjectivity, through Henry's video *in lieu of* her memory, is inevitably a subjectivity formed on Henry's terms. Kaja Silverman's intervention into Barthes' writing on the author speaks to this problematic. Silverman makes the compelling argument that despite declaring famously that the author is dead,<sup>62</sup> Barthes reconstitutes the "authorial body" – five years after "the Death of the Author," in *The Pleasure of the Text* – "not as biographical or corporeal profile but as the materiality of writing. The body of the author has become the (highly eroticized) body of the text."<sup>63</sup> This anthropomorphization of the text Silverman identifies, if we read the content of memory as a text, bears striking parallels to the dyadic model of subconscious embodied memory and technologically mediated memory put forth by this thesis. This is to say the destruction, or 'deprivileging,'<sup>64</sup> of the author and the author's reconstitution in the *body* of the text essentially describes a process of technological mediation. What is significant about this event, so to speak, is that just as the status of the author comes undone in the act of

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<sup>62</sup> See Barthes, "The Death of the Author."

<sup>63</sup> Silverman, 190.

<sup>64</sup> Silverman, 214.

mediatization, it is returned to an embodied form. Put differently, just as embodied memory imagines a profoundly powerful ‘pure’ memory, the death of the author constitutes a kind of pure authorship – one that belongs not to an individual, but to the technological or material mediatization of the text itself. We can productively understand *50 First Dates* to be responding, albeit unconsciously, to this dissolution of the paternalistic author. If the new figure of the author asserts itself through embodiment in the text, then the film certainly works to ensure that Lucy’s embodiment in the narrative of her memory is in fact authored by Henry; there is this effort to reassert the paternalistic author as the subject who is actually ‘writing.’ We can find a literalization of such a reassertion in Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000), in which the amnesiac protagonist, Leonard (Guy Pearce), covers his body with tattoos that function as instructions to help him navigate and solve the mystery of who might be after him and why. Leonard’s tattoos constitute a bodily text that bears witness to his authorial subjectivity – the author and the text are quite literally embodied as one and the same. Here we can see how the authorial body is not only textual in a strictly material sense, apropos of Barthes, but it is also sexual and therefore imbricated with the power dynamics that follow from its genderization.

While the power dynamic of sorts that follows from Silverman’s Barthesian model of embodied authorship may appear to articulate the primacy of technology in a technological age insofar as the text becomes dominant, I argue that in actuality it works to settle the score between the human and the technological. The status of the authorial body is, in a sense, no longer threatened by the encroachment of technological anonymity – rather, the authorial body is affirmed by and through the text. Indeed, as Silverman reminds us, “the author’s body remains as the support for and agent of *écriture*.”<sup>65</sup> The material existence of the text is thus evidence that

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<sup>65</sup> Silverman, 189.

an authorial subjectivity has in fact been constituted. Significantly, Silverman recognizes that Barthes' efforts to dispossess the author of his position is coded in highly gendered terms – to be specific, the author is meant to be stripped of his “paternal legacy.”<sup>66</sup> What is interesting about this gendered decomposition of the author is that it describes a model of female authorship that is perhaps always already embodied and grounded in a certain textual materiality. It is perhaps unsurprising that there is a corresponding effort to reclaim the ground apparently lost by the paternalistic author when one considers Elsaesser's description of the gendering of digital age technology more generally. As Elsaesser notes, “women have been crucial in ‘naturalizing’ a new media technology as well as problematizing its effects on gender relations.”<sup>67</sup> Elsaesser's phrasing on the link between recent media technologies and notions of the feminine is worth recalling at length:

“In the emphasis on such traditional attributes of the female mind as ‘parallel processing’, ‘distributed attention’ or ‘collaborative intelligence’, the digital media may find themselves naturalized by virtue of being ‘feminized’: perhaps in order to keep at bay – and to control – another form of the undeadness of data, the ‘too much’ of stimuli that threatens the very possibility of perception and comprehension, and thus the very manageability of processing.”<sup>68</sup>

Elsaesser's account makes clear the gender dynamics underlying contemporary anxieties around the overwhelming of the human in a technological age. This is to say that the looming dangers of ubiquitous computing in a technological age is coded in gendered terms. Following from Elsaesser, the threat of the digital age becomes not only de-humanization, but emasculation.

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<sup>66</sup> Silverman, 191.

<sup>67</sup> Elsaesser, “Freud,” 112.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



The model of subconscious embodied memory in *50 First Dates* also leaves intact the imagination of a kind of original state of nature, an initial subjectivity that is articulated seamlessly with the ‘natural’ body. Insofar as Lucy’s amnesia renders her a kind of original ‘blank slate,’ she comes to stand in for a kind of primaeval woman, a figure of pure narrative potentiality. It is in this sense that Lucy’s function in the narrative of *50 First Dates* parallels the function of another ‘Lucy’ from the field of paleoanthropology. In Lori D. Hager’s edited collection on the representation of women in discourses around human evolution, she works through the gendered implications of Donald Johanson’s 1974 discovery of “Lucy,” one of the earliest known hominids at the time, in Hadar, Ethiopia.<sup>69</sup> Significantly, the discovery of our early bipedal ancestor challenged many assumptions about human evolution, perhaps most significantly when and where we began to walk upright, and remains a source of debate in the paleoanthropological community.<sup>70</sup> Since the overarching goal of studying early hominids is “the very nature of what it is to be a modern human,”<sup>71</sup> as Hager asserts, “knowing whether [‘Lucy’] was a female or not is ultimately of great consequence to understanding ourselves”<sup>72</sup> Importantly, Hager identifies a tendency within paleoanthropology to understand early female hominids according to the conceptions of gender that circumscribe the researcher’s sociohistorical moment.<sup>73</sup> The implication here is that even scientific understandings of ourselves as humans are inflected by the ideological inclinations particular to the sociohistorical moment of discovery and not origin. Johanson’s best-selling written account of his find integrates his discovery of Lucy, and thus the writing of the history of humankind, within a detailed personal

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<sup>69</sup> Hager, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Lewin, 45-46.

<sup>71</sup> Hager, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Hager, 14.

<sup>73</sup> Hager, 1.

narrative. The lively book often reads somewhat like an adventurer's memoir; indeed, a New York Times reviewer points out "certain lapses of humility" in Johanson's description of events;<sup>74</sup> Johanson's vibrant persona and his memory of events become sutured to the story of Lucy's discovery. This is to say that once again we find a demonstration of authorial embodiment constituted in and through the text – Johanson and the ideological underpinnings of his historical moment are inscribed onto Lucy's textual body. In both cases, Lucy functions as something of a historical vessel, a 'blank slate' onto which paternalistic authors may (re)write their past in service of a future that maintains the status quo. Such a scenario indicates how a conceptualization of an embodied authorial subject, or 'figure' in Barthes' terms, holds significant implications for the text. That is, by considering Johanson's "Lucy" alongside the Lucy of *50 First Dates*, we can begin to complicate the notion of embodied authorship by acknowledging the relative fiction of the blank slate in the first place.

In Hélène Cixous' seminal essay, "The Laugh of Medusa," she draws attention to the extent to which women are alienated from the act of writing, of writing themselves into the world, an act reserved for the "great men" of history.<sup>75</sup> She discusses the fear conjured by "female-sexed texts"<sup>76</sup> because, in the simplest of terms, these texts threaten the primacy of the male author and challenge the invisibilization of women under such circumstances. Writing in 1976, Cixous asserts, "writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy."<sup>77</sup> In a (wo)manifesto of sorts, Cixous interestingly maintains an indelible connection between a woman's writing of her self and the writing of her body. For Cixous, though she

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<sup>74</sup> Rensberger, n.p.

<sup>75</sup> Cixous, 876.

<sup>76</sup> Cixous, 877.

<sup>77</sup> Cixous, 879.

insists elsewhere that a “feminine practice of writing” is impossible to define,<sup>78</sup> women’s writing perhaps always already necessitates the creation of a textually *embodied* authorial subject. Indeed, Cixous seems to recognize this emergence of an authorial subjectivity in and through the body of the text when she exclaims, “Write! and your self-seeking text will know itself better than flesh and blood.”<sup>79</sup> Here embodied authorship acquires and exceeds the self-assuring credibility of embodiment. Perhaps most importantly for this project, Cixous insists compellingly that “writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.”<sup>80</sup> It is here that Cixous articulates clearly the political stakes and radical potentiality of women who write. This is to say that a woman ‘writing her self,’ to borrow Cixous’ phrasing, inhabits a moment of liberation that is also the emergence of a textually embodied female author. Perhaps then it is unsurprising that the notion of Lucy’s authorship presents such a stubborn problematic for the narrative goals of *50 First Dates*.

Indeed, Lucy’s subconscious embodied memory represents a kind of author of last resort. Lucy is apparently unable to participate in the technological mediation of her memory; in fact, the disenfranchisement of her authorial voice intensifies as the technologies utilized move further towards the digital end of the spectrum. For example, Lucy becomes less directly involved with the digitization of her diary and the production of the video. Lucy’s mysterious ability to recall Henry’s image through her artwork despite having erased him from her technologically mediated memory attests to this power of the subconscious (female) embodied memory. In this sense Lucy’s subconscious embodied memory functions as a key site of resistance to the paternalistic

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<sup>78</sup> Cixous, 883.

<sup>79</sup> Cixous, 889.

<sup>80</sup> Cixous, 879.

authorship of her life – it is perhaps the last remaining register of her memory that does not accommodate technological intervention. Of course, Lucy’s subconscious embodied memory also performs a function for Henry. Similar to Alaska, Lucy’s subconscious embodied memory provides a redemptive site of purity – Lucy becomes the pure, amenable, and importantly *analog* vehicle through which the male author’s mediation can be renewed without the technological hell of the modern U.S. Ultimately, the author as an embodied textual figure disrupts the temporality of a paternalistic model of authorship that insists on a pre-existing authorial subject, fully constituted before and without the text. The scenario that emerges from such an imagination of the authorial body reiterates the centrality of materiality – that is, the *writing* of memory – to the formation of a subject with a voice. Textually embodied authorship thus becomes a crucial part of self-determination. It perhaps unsurprising that this model of embodied authorship emerges in such a literal form when, as Pettman observes, “we see an emerging renegotiation of embodied identity in a unprecedented technophilic and –phobic age”<sup>81</sup> We are left to ask the question, what are the implications of this injunction to write oneself, so to speak, in(to) the digital age?

## **THE SLEEPING BODY**

Similar to other amnesia films like *Memento*, *Clean Slate*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and, of course, *Before I Go to Sleep*, sleep plays a critical role in the functioning of memory in *50 First Dates*. The representation of sleep as such a powerful force in these films ultimately corresponds with their common insistence on the primacy of the body, due principally to the construction of the body’s privileged and unassailable connection to subconscious

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<sup>81</sup> Pettman, 12.

embodied memory. The following discussion will focus on sleep as the site of two key and seemingly paradoxical processes – both erasure and remembrance – in *50 First Dates* and its other ‘amnesia film’ companions. First, while the aforementioned films adopt variably fantastical and more scientific approaches to memory, in each case sleep constitutes the site of erasure – it is the *sleeping* body that forgets or else is made to forget via technological means. In *Eternal Sunshine*, even though the rather surreal pseudo-medical memory erasure procedure is an elective service, the vulnerability of the sleeping body is regarded opportunistically; drug-aided/enhanced sleep is the optimal state of being for the technicians of Lacuna Inc. to do their work. By capitalizing on the biological necessity of sleep, Lacuna seems to overcome what would otherwise be sleep’s resistance to the capitalist logic of 24/7 activity. Or, to put it in Crary’s terms, “sleep is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism.”<sup>82</sup> In simple and cynical terms, we cannot consume in our sleep. Of course, any understanding of sleep includes the knowledge that on some level the sleeping brain is always an amnesiac brain; as the sleeping brain consolidates the day, the most important/meaningful/traumatic memories are inscribed on what we would call our long term memory while what the brain deems less important is sloughed off into the ether of our unconscious. It follows that sleep is essential to our ability to consolidate information, experience new memories, and so forth so that we may move onwards with our lives making use of the past in service of the future. The representation of sleep in *Eternal Sunshine* is largely compatible with that of *50 First Dates*; sleep is in fact the relentless instrument of memory loss after Lucy’s accident. As we are reminded several times throughout the film (as though we may forget ourselves), it is as if Lucy’s “slate is wiped clean” every night as she sleeps. Lucy’s

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<sup>82</sup> Crary, 10.

quality of life is quite obviously limited by her memory condition and whatever progress Henry seems to have made in their courtship each day is undone overnight. The implication is that if only Lucy could find a way to avoid sleeping, perhaps she could remember Henry into the next day. Yet, as Crary reminds us, sleep is thus far an immovable force. This is made clear the night Henry and Lucy have sex for the first time; the couple tries desperately to stay awake, knowing too well that Lucy will not remember a thing the next morning. Indeed, when Lucy awakes the next morning to find a man she does not recognize in her bed it is hardly surprising that she attacks him with a lacrosse stick. Regardless of how superficially successful Henry's video and/or Lucy's diaries may be in standing in for Lucy's lost memory during the day, the world of technology is shown to be outmatched by the biological necessity of sleep. We can begin to see here how sleep as a site of erasure deadens what is understood to be the technological encroachment onto the territory of sleep. Such a conceptualization gives way to larger questions about the extent to which a kind of essential identity, as represented in subconscious embodied memory, is also under threat in a technological age.

Since sleep is where dreaming happens, it is also often a site of remembrance – subconscious embodied memory manifests itself in and through the amnesiac subjects' dreamscape. As discussed in the first chapter's analysis of Lucy's miraculous remembrance of Henry while living at the psychiatric institute, Lucy's dreams appeared to be able to reach the depths of her subconscious embodied memory. Once Henry's image – and as I argued a certain 'essence' of Lucy's love for him – populated the landscape of her dreams, Lucy was subsequently able to give the images of her subconscious memory material form. Sleep, or more precisely dreaming, comes to temporarily bridge the gap between subconscious embodied memory and technologically mediated memory. In so doing sleep reiterates the 'natural' human body as a site

of technological resistance and also, apropos of Crary, a site of resistance to the 24/7 consumer capitalist demands of life in the digital age more generally. In dreaming, the body becomes a unique and ultimately analog technology that is able to access the terrain of subconscious embodied memory. Moreover, forgoing something like inception, the dreamer constitutes a singular authorial subject, unburdened and unrestricted by the interests of other authors.

### **THE ETHICAL OTHER**

Ula's five young children, almost always recording the action on a handheld video camera, occupy the background of several scenes over the course of the film – apparently, Ula is making an amateur documentary about his life. It is actually the same video camera that Henry borrows in order to produce Lucy's video. Ula's children's seemingly innocuous presence in the wings of so many scenes performs a symbolic function of what I will call the figure of the 'ethical other'; here we can identify a parallel in contemporary discourses around privacy in the Internet age. Ula's children recall the way in which the ethical other – who is always already 'watching' in the digital age – could be almost anyone. The unsettling and uncertain potential of such 'watchers' has been acknowledged as a dimension of participatory cultures on the Internet from the early days of chat rooms and discussion boards. As Henry Jenkins notes, early discussion groups around David Lynch's cult television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) referred to such non-participating observers as "lurkers,"<sup>83</sup> gesturing to both an elusive pseudo-presence and perhaps a kind of latent danger of the unknowable other(s) online. Today, it is common knowledge that virtually everything we do on our computers and 'smart' devices is archived and available to 'Big Brother.' As Orit Halpern reminds us, though she works to denaturalize this

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<sup>83</sup> Jenkins, 53.

notion, “we have come to assume that the world is always already fully recorded and archived; accessible at a moment’s notice through the logics of computational searches.”<sup>84</sup> This may lead us to ask, what does it mean to construct a personal archive with the assumption that it will be made eventually – or perhaps even immediately – open to publics and authorial voices that cannot be controlled by the ‘original’ author? One result is a kind of anxious compulsion to clarify ‘for the record’ one’s intentions or true feelings, lest the eventual viewer/reader misinterpret the ‘memory.’ Thus the constitution of the authorial subject is inflected by a kind of self-censorship. Cognizant of what is presumed to be our inevitable failure to act as effective gatekeepers of our ‘data’ in the age of the Internet, we write largely for an anonymous future reader(s). Thus technologically mediated memory becomes a form of memory that is always already co-authored by an (albeit imagined) other. It is perhaps easy then to understand the appeal of a model of subconscious embodied memory that is resistant to technological intervention when the alternative appears to offer such a compromised position of authorial subjectivity. Pettman, apropos of Silverman’s work on visual attraction, maintains that in such a scenario in which the self does not precede the encounter with the other, “The ‘ontological force’ [...] prompts an ethical assessment of one’s own actions, not so much in the moralistic-behavioural sense (“Am I a good person?”) but according to a more symbolic economy of recognition and deferral (“Am I a person?”).”<sup>85</sup> Pettman’s parsing of the ontological force of the encounter with the other helps to illustrate the stakes of my analysis of the figure of the ethical other in *50 First Dates* – that is, in the wake of something of a crisis of authorial subjectivity, the

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<sup>84</sup> Halpern, 13.

<sup>85</sup> Pettman, xii-xiii.



ethical other appears as a manifestation of cultural concerns around the participatory turn in digital era memory processes.

Before conducting an analysis of Ula's children as emblematic of the figure of the ethical other in relation to memory authorship, it is necessary to develop fully the technological and ideological context from which this figure emerges. Indeed, while Silverman's parsing of Barthes provides a useful theorization of female authorship, it is prudent to look to how other scholars have configured authorship specifically with regards to the age of digital technology. Taina Bucher identifies the seemingly paradoxical dual function of the Internet in relation to something like the formation of authorial subjectivity:

“The regime of visibility associated with Web 2.0 connects to the notion of empowerment, as it has greatly expanded the social field of becoming recognized as a subject with a voice. On the other hand, ubiquitous computing with increased deployment of surveillance technologies has often been associated with a sense of disempowerment.”<sup>86</sup>

In a situation such as the one Bucher describes, it becomes apparent that a certain degree of technological memory mediation is demanded by modes of subject-formation in the age of the Internet. Bucher argues in relation to more recent social media phenomena, namely Facebook, that we are no longer governed by the kind of “threat of visibility” Foucault elucidates from the architecture of the Panopticon, but rather by a “threat of invisibility.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, Foucault's characterization of the panopticon prisoner always as a seen object, never a seeing subject,<sup>88</sup> resists transposition onto life in the age of the Internet. Today, social media platforms such as

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<sup>86</sup> Bucher, 1165.

<sup>87</sup> Bucher, 1171.

<sup>88</sup> Foucault, 200.

Facebook facilitate both the generation and consumption of content; such ‘sharing’ complicates previously more stable models of surveillance. Van Dijck notes how our use of Facebook is structured around an imperative of ‘sharing’ instead of privacy, which is propped up, or perhaps better ‘re-branded,’ in opposition to the contemporary values of openness and transparency.<sup>89</sup> Though it may be tempting to read Internet 2.0 as a kind of dispersed and malevolent form of corporate and/or government surveillance on a grand scale, it is important to recognize our willful participation in such a structure. In many ways we have co-opted our own surveillance, becoming clusters of readable and, importantly, *intimate* data. Social media platforms now mediate our wider social, professional, and sexual domains of life – we make look to Facebook, LinkedIn, Academia.edu, eHarmony.com, and also ‘hookup’ apps like Tinder for examples of the apparent necessity of ‘personal profiles’ to multiple dimensions of contemporary life, to say nothing of the often confessional utterances that constitute our ‘status updates.’ It becomes clear that we cannot fully become authorial subjects, or ‘subjects with a voice’ in Bucher’s terms, until we ‘visualize,’ or perhaps ‘share,’ our memories. Put differently, the technological mediation of our memories is demanded as a crucial component of subject formation in the digital age. This recalls Silverman’s account of the status of the authorial body after Barthes in the sense that the act of writing constitutes the precondition, not the result, of subject-formation. Ultimately, if Lucy is the subject whose formation is paramount in *50 First Dates*, and Henry is the primary author, then Ula’s children come to represent the elusive third party, the ethical other of the digital imaginary.

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<sup>89</sup> Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 46.



Fig. 1

Ula's children's video camera enters the diegesis early on; immediately after the film's introductory sequence chronicling Henry's series of flings, we are taken to the marine park where a large crowd is applauding the dolphin show. The camera plunges into the water alongside a dolphin to find the porthole that separates Henry's office from the pool. We glimpse a group of small children with a video camera pointed at the tank. It is from here that the camera appears to move through the glass and into Henry's office where he is stitching a shark bite his eccentric friend Ula has sustained. Ula's children are recording the spectacle, though this could easily go unobserved. What is curious about this scene is that our attention is drawn to the video camera's presence only after it occurs to Ula that a joke about sharks may be the perfect title for his "documentary." If previously we might have disregarded the video camera as simply a prop for the children to play with in the background of the scene, now the camera and its 'documentary' function is foregrounded. Indeed, in this scene amateur 'documentary' is always already lurking in the background, awaiting its call to use. As Ula turns to his children to repeat his nonsensical line into the lens of the video camera, there is a cut to a lower-grade digital image marked by the red dot and "REC" stamp in the bottom left corner (fig. 1). The implication

here is that we are viewing the footage captured by the children on the video camera. Both Ula and Henry address the video camera with silly one-liners before we are released from the “documentary” within the film; this shift back to the ‘real world’ of the film is punctuated by another shot of the children recording the moment on video. The rest of the scene cuts back and forth between the amateur video footage and the more polished look of the film itself. Of course, the majority of the film is certainly rather farcical, but it is worth noting how Ula and Henry’s decidedly inane one-liners are reserved for the video camera. What is important to observe in this scene is how the video camera’s presence, standing in for a kind of digital other, embeds a certain performativity into Ula and Henry’s behaviour. To articulate the significance of this for an understanding of memory (co)authorship in the digital age, we can look to Philip Agre’s notion of ‘capture’ as a model of privacy. Agre explains how we internalize knowledge of the workings of devices of capture (eg. video cameras, analog film cameras, microphones, etc.). This has the effect of, “reordering behaviour so that it is more amenable to capture models (which were likely developed under the fiction that they transparently represented the prior state of behaviour).”<sup>90</sup> To cite a banal explanatory example of the effect of capture that often appears on digital video sharing platforms such as YouTube,<sup>91</sup> we can think of the uncanny video recordings of people who are under the false impression that they are posing for a still photo – they tend to pull faces and attempt to suspend their bodily movement *as though* the camera were capturing a more spontaneous single moment in chaotic time. In such a scenario, subjects behave for the benefit of the (assumed) technology of capture. However, video footage of such miscalculations

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<sup>90</sup> Agre, 737.

<sup>91</sup> See “Super Awkward Montage of People Thinking They Are Posing For Pictures,” available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cgw5TVoh-qU>, which illustrates the emphasis on affective discomfort, or ‘awkwardness,’ that ensues upon fissures of ‘capture.’

often exposes the uncomfortable disjuncture that ensues, the discomfort of which arguably stems from revealing the charade of spontaneity in this case. In their ubiquitous presence, always already recording the scene at hand on the video camera, I propose that Ula's children are conflated with a decidedly digital technology of 'capture' (i.e., the video camera) and the understandings of credibility therein. Their presence, insofar as they are aligned with the function of the video camera, shapes the behavior of the subjects on camera. Furthermore, we can draw parallels here between the function of the ethical other and certain conceptions of confessionality in the digital age. In Michael Renov's analysis of the centrality of confessionality to video cultures in the early days of the Internet, he recalls Foucault's definition of the confession as a kind of ritual in which the 'listener' maintains a powerful ethical position over the confessor.<sup>92</sup> While Renov insists that he does not intend to "make claims for something like a confessional potentiality intrinsic to the electronic medium," he does admit to arguing, in 1996, for "a uniquely charged linkage between 'video' and 'confession' in the current cultural environment."<sup>93</sup> This 'charged linkage' helps to corroborate the notion that Ula's children acquire an ethical function largely by virtue of their alignment with digital technologies of capture. That is, in addition to the relatively innocent morality aligned with their youth, by literalizing the 'lurking' publics of the Internet age, Ula's children become a kind of ethical mass – their presence in concordance with the video camera effectively reorders the behaviours at hand on behalf of the technology of capture, the home video camera in this case.

Of course, Ula's children are more than just a soundboard for some of the perhaps weaker jokes in the dialogue of the scene. When the children (who are still recording their interactions)

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<sup>92</sup> Renov, 79.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

ask what a “nympho” means, Ula once again addresses the camera and fibs that the “nympho” is the state bird of Ohio. Throughout this scene the video camera functions not only to document the rather inconsequential conversation between Henry and Ula, but also to offer a corrective to some of the more unsavoury moments. For example, when Ula makes an offhand and disparaging remark about his wife there is a cut away to Ula’s children who are still recording their father. Acting as a kind of minor Greek chorus, the four younger children stand frowning with their arms folded while the eldest boy observes the event through the display screen attached to the video camera; each child is visibly upset. It is difficult to say whether it is the presence of his children or the video camera that causes Ula to back-peddle and insist that he was “just kidding.” At any rate, the result is a perhaps accidental collusion between the assumed innocence of the children and the video camera, which never forgets. This innocent ‘perfect’ memory offers something of a counter to the film’s engagement with amnesia – here the threat is posed more by remembering than forgetting. Of course, my comparison of Ula’s children to the chorus of Grecian drama is a loaded one, meant to emphasize how the figure of the ethical other, insofar as it is associated if not conflated with devices of capture (ie. the video camera), acquires a quality of objectivity by virtue of this association with ‘photographic’ technologies. It is this accepted objectivity of the anonymous other in the digital age that encourages us to regard the figure of the *ethical* other as such.

## **THE THEMATIZATION OF OBSERVATION**

The film’s opening scene in Henry’s ‘underwater’ office introduces an element of lurking observation that pervades the film from this point onwards. Indeed, characters are frequently being observed without their knowledge or permission, much like the dolphins in the tank. The

glow from the water tank imbues Henry's office with the bluish hue we perhaps most closely associate with a television or computer screen (Fig. 2). There are gags throughout the film in which dolphins (and sometimes Ula) in the tank look in on Henry in his office. Frequently, unwelcome observation occurs in moments when presumably the characters would most like privacy. For example, when Henry and Lucy are about to have sex for the first time after a romantic date at the marine park, two dolphins appear to be looking in through the window dividing Henry's office from the tank – Henry has to shoo them away. After that, Henry looks up from the sofa in his office to discover Ula watching enthusiastically and miming suggestions from inside the tank. Henry's office performs multiple functions throughout the film; it is Henry's place of work, though he also appears to sleep there, as well as a love nest, and a hangout complete with beer kept cool in a refrigerator meant to house biological samples. While in practical terms Henry's multipurpose office is convenient, it also literalizes the blurring of public and private spaces that characterizes the age of the Internet. Here the window functions as a kind of two-way screen by which Henry is simultaneously observing and observed. Indeed, the window is hardly a neutrally transparent pane of glass, but rather a screen that mediates and distorts vision on either side. Thus Henry's office becomes a kind of elsewhere akin to a virtual space. Its 'underwater' location is amenable to such a reading; visually, the space is reminiscent of depictions of virtual spaces, or perhaps more precisely cyberspace, common to the genre of science fiction. My intention is not to propose a symbolic reading of this aspect of *50 First Dates*, but rather to suggest that the depiction of such spaces – that is, spaces that facilitate observation and surveillance simultaneously – borrows from a visual repertoire circumscribed by digital technologies. This is to say that the observation of the private from within public space, and vice versa, becomes wed to the visuality of screen technologies, the interfaces that enable

both observation and surveillance. It is also important to note how such a notion of the interface complicates more straightforward understandings of private and public. Indeed, the shared screen between the aquarium and Henry's office constitutes a liminal zone of observation that is alien both to public and private space. There are obvious parallels to the virtual here insofar as subjects on either side of the screen are simultaneously observing and observed; in other words, to use the screen for surveillance is also to be surveilled. The dual function of the screen is reiterated when, as mentioned above, Ula dives into the dolphin tank in order to observe Henry and Lucy in the office. As it happens, Henry's office bears a striking resemblance to the bunker built in 1999 by the dot-com entrepreneur Josh Harris, in which Harris staged a 'social experiment' of sorts that sought to accelerate and demonstrate the Orwellian futures of the Internet.<sup>94</sup> Every corner of the bunker was surveilled by video cameras and each participant had a personal television monitor in their sleeping pods with which to 'tune in' to other participants' monitors or any other surveillance footage from the bunker's many cameras. As a result of the multitude of the 'always on' screens, the visual effect of this environment of ubiquitous surveillance and observation coated the bunker with a flickering bluish light similar to the observation floors of aquariums. Early imaginations of the perhaps darker potential futures of life in the age of the Internet, or "panoptic paranoia"<sup>95</sup> to borrow Kilbourn's turn of phrase, have clearly enjoyed a lasting aestheticization that is grounded (at least visually) in a contested zone of ubiquitous and mutual surveillance. Thus an always already semi-public life in the digital age,

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<sup>94</sup> See Ondi Timoner's 2009 documentary on Josh Harris, *We Live in Public*. As demonstrated in work by Nathan Jurgenson as well as Steve Mann and Joseph Ferenbok in the scholarly journal *Surveillance & Society*, Josh Harris is still popularly regarded as a rather prophetic and/or pioneering figure in the recent history of the Internet and social media as we have come to know it.

<sup>95</sup> Kilbourn, 136.



at least for *50 First Dates*, is rendered as a kind of virtual observation tank.



Fig. 2

At the beginning of the film, Lucy also lives in a kind of captivity; she spends her daily life in the few ‘secure’ locations that can be monitored by her family and friends. From what we see, her activities are limited to the family home, the Huki Lau Café where Sue and Nick look after her, and the stretches of highway in between. Lucy and Henry’s courtship is, for the most part, intensely supervised. Their (many) first encounters at the Huki Lau Café are overseen by Sue and the meat-cleaver-wielding Nick, who repeatedly remind Henry that they are prepared to step in to protect Lucy’s interests. Later, Marlin and Doug make a point of being rather remarkably in the loop when it comes to Lucy’s interactions with Henry, resulting in his banishment from the café. All this merely functions to reiterate a basic conceit of the film – that everyone, especially Lucy, is constantly vulnerable to being observed by an unauthorized other who may intervene. By way of bookending the thematization of surveillance in *50 First Dates*, it is worth noting that the final song that plays over the ending credits is in fact UB40’s rendition of The Police’s “Every Breath You Take.” Once again, we see a literalization of the re-authoring

process that runs through the film's narrative – despite UB40's ska twist on the popular song, it is virtually impossible to listen to “Every Breath You Take” without ‘hearing’ Sting and his iconic voice. As the following verse cascades over the rolling text, we are confronted with a kind of vaguely threatening love note that rather accurately characterizes Lucy's ultimate predicament:

*Every single day*

*And every word you say*

*Every game you play, every night you stay*

*I'll be watching you*

Here *50 First Dates* appears almost cheekily canny to its elision of Lucy's agency throughout the film. Indeed, this less popular version of the song is a cover of the original that would have been performed by Sting, its ‘author,’ so to speak. Beyond reiterating the running theme of surveillance, this final song reflects, albeit allegorically, a central concern of the film – that is, the easy bleeding of authorship so often associated with the digital age.

## CONCLUSION

Following from the analysis above, a key component of self-determination, or more precisely the articulation of an authorial subject, becomes one's ability to demarcate a private domain of memory in an age circumscribed by what is now perhaps a cliché blurring of public and private. This presents obvious parallels to concerns over what Sassen refers to as “private digital space.”<sup>96</sup> In the midst of a “colonizing of public digital space by private (i.e., corporate) actors,”<sup>97</sup> the distinction between private and public space – and, further, what is meant by

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<sup>96</sup> Sassen, 105.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

‘privacy’ – has become increasingly difficult to discern in the digital. *50 First Dates*’ construction of subconscious embodied memory as a kind of analog alternative to technologically mediated memory, resistant to intervention, emerges largely in response to such concerns. Put differently, when the spaces we occupy either in cyberspace or ‘meatspace,’ to borrow from Manovich, cease to be either distinctly private or public, there appears to be a subsequent effort to reassert a kind of ultimate private space delineated by the body. Thus the human body becomes a kind of technological dead zone and, for *50 First Dates*, an emblem of the romanticization of resistance to a kind of cyborgian future. Here memory itself becomes the most powerful entity while the body becomes a technology, acting as a gatekeeper for perhaps a quintessentially analog (by virtue of its connection to the body) register of memory. Such a scenario demands that a model of authorial subjectivity – one that is perhaps not yet co-authored by the figure of the ethical other – be constituted in subconscious embodied memory. More generally, this situation gestures to the cultural anxieties surrounding the threatened position of the human in the digital age. Of course, the impulse to reassert the primacy of the human in the face of technology has long been a feature of modernity. Halpern reminds us, apropos of Barthes, that, “the presentation of reality, a feature of nineteenth century literature, emerged [...] at the moment when human experience was increasingly mediated – through new techniques of writing, reading, and recording.”<sup>98</sup> To recall an illustrative example of Halpern’s observation, Elsaesser notes in his essay on Freud “as a media theorist:”

“Freud was apparently more interested in the human body/psyche as (technical) medium than in technical media as such: in the face of the invasion of mass media he was, above all, a cultural conservative, as if his invention of psychoanalysis was aimed at preserving

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<sup>98</sup> Halpern, 49.

the embodied and gendered nature of communication against its increasing disembodiment, mechanization, decontextualization and automation.”<sup>99</sup>

While my analysis of *50 First Dates* elucidates a similar project to Freud’s, as described by Elsaesser, it is important to account for the vicissitudes of this rather defensive move towards the human body in the digital age. This is to say that the disembodiment, automation, and other threats to the status of ‘natural’ human memory have undoubtedly intensified in a digital era and taken a form that Freud could not have predicted. We can find an example of this anxiety around how the technological mediation of our memories and thus our identities on the Internet renders our ‘private selves’ open to an ultimately unknowable ‘public’ in J Sage Elwell’s description of a “browsable” transmediated identity.<sup>100</sup> Elwell argues that such identities are produced in and formed by the liminal space between the real and the virtual in an era circumscribed by “constant connectivity and ubiquitous computing.”<sup>101</sup> Here mediated identity in the digital age becomes not only public as opposed to private and technologically as opposed to ‘naturally’ constituted, but also collective as opposed to individual – and this is clearly a cause for concern for the author. In an attempt to address the gap between what is understood as individual and collective memory in a modern technological age, Alison Landsberg theorizes a cinematic “prosthetic memory.” Landsberg’s model of prosthetic memory functions somewhat like an external hard drive, or, to mobilize her metaphor, like an artificial limb – an extension of the human that is decidedly unhuman, virtual, and technological. Perhaps most importantly for Landsberg, a prosthetic memory is also “produced by an *experience* of mass-mediated representations.”<sup>102</sup> The

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<sup>99</sup> Elsaesser, “Freud,” 105.

<sup>100</sup> Elwell, 234.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Landsberg, 20.

prosthetic becomes a part of the self that is constituted not simply through an encounter with an other, but a *technologically mediated* experience of a kind of second-hand memory that was always already produced ‘one-size-fits-all’ and yet simultaneously of *another’s* memories.<sup>103</sup> To the extent that memories constitute crucial components of identity, the threat lurking in the shadows of this scenario seems to be the vanishing of individuality into the digital abyss. Indeed, as Kilbourn reminds us, “rather than an historical consciousness that might allow for individually and socially progressive political action, postmodern pop culture gives us ‘collective memory’ as often as not packaged in *nostalgic* terms.”<sup>104</sup> Whether memory (and perhaps identity) in the digital age is ‘collective,’ ‘prosthetic,’ ‘transmediated,’ or otherwise, what becomes clear is that this persistent turn towards the human and analog in the digital age is essentially very much in line with modern sensibilities that value the articulation of individuality, personal uniqueness, and the singular (and gendered) figure of the author.

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<sup>103</sup> Kilbourn emphasizes how Landsberg’s theorization of both nostalgia and prosthetic memory is essentially a case of “the subject appropriating ‘memories,’ a past, so to speak, that is not proper to it; someone *else’s* past; *another’s* memories” (124).

<sup>104</sup> Kilbourn, 124.

## **Conclusion**

The two chapters of this thesis have worked in tandem to articulate the broader stakes of my case study of *50 First Dates*. By working through the intersecting functions of technology and memory within an intimate relationship in the film, I hope to have operationalized amnesia as a vector through which we can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the status of ‘human’ memory in the digital age. While ultimately I sought to demonstrate just some of the myriad ways in which a bifurcated understanding of memory haunts larger discussions around privacy and intimacy in the digital age, such a claim must stand on the shoulders of two key proofs. The first chapter, “The Eternal Sunshine of Lucy’s Mind” established the first of these proofs – namely, that this dyadic model of memory is cut along distinctly technological lines. This chapter worked to elucidate how objects along the analog/digital spectrum are regarded differently in terms of their suitability to act as memory aids and substitutes. It is through this consistent nostalgic privileging of the analog and distrust of the digital that a dyadic model of memory emerges, with subconscious embodied memory associated with the analog and technologically mediated memory aligned with the digital. By conducting textual analyses of important ‘technological moments’ in the film and demonstrating the extent to which analog technologies are privileged for their greater proximity to the human body, I hope to have brought my two-part model of memory into relief. Ultimately, this first chapter begins an examination of how such a conception of memory (or rather the opposition of two models of memory) both informs and is informed by discourses around human intimacy in the digital age. This examination is revisited and extended in perhaps more overtly political terms, particularly with regards to models of authorship, in Chapter II.

The second chapter, “My Private Alaska,” takes its cue from the first chapter’s theorization of subconscious embodied memory and technologically mediated memory in order to investigate the broader implications of the participatory turn in digital era memory processes. The second proof provided by this chapter asserts that such a fractured understanding of memory is symptomatic of the modern tendency to reassert and recommit to the ‘natural’ human body as a kind of sacred ground to be defended from the digital. Lucy’s memory condition, in which her working daily memory is more or less housed in external media such as Henry’s video, literalizes the perceived vulnerability of human memory in the digital age. If technological intervention in memory processes accommodates a situation in which our memories and thus crucial components of our identities may be authored (or at least co-authored) by others, as indeed the film suggests, then it is perhaps easy to understand the appeal of subconscious embodied memory – that is, a form of memory that is both resistant towards and inaccessible to technological mediation and the claims of other ‘authors.’ The attractiveness of subconscious embodied memory and thus a form of embodied authorship is compounded when we consider the imperative of writing oneself into the fabric of the digital, to echo Bucher’s notion of the threat of invisibility. This is to say that subconscious embodied memory preserves the possibility of a kind of ‘pure’ unmediated authorial subjectivity. My analysis of the function of authorship sought to articulate the ideological underpinnings of the film’s engagement with the act of writing memory (and thus producing a viable authorial subject) through technologies. The notion of (co)authoring in the digital age, in relation to an ethical other who is always already observing, gestures towards the extent to which the digital is perceived to threaten the individual. In the face of a technological domination perceived fearfully to be inevitable, the bifurcated model of memory outlined above effectively splinters our conception of memory – we yield



technologically mediated memory to the digital (and to the lurking ethical others) while insisting on subconscious embodied memory as a kind of mystical, truth-telling, (and perhaps essentially female) analog par excellence.

## IN LOVING MEMORY

Significantly for this project, *50 First Dates* links the perceived threat to human memory to the status of intimate relationships. This anxiety around the technological mediation of memory— that is, the idea that when our memories are mediated through digital technologies they become more vulnerable to manipulation and we become less able to detect that manipulation – is ultimately less of a problem for memory itself, at least as far as the films are concerned. Instead, in many ways the primary concern of the film is actually how a kind of decomposition of human memory may affect intimate relationships. Indeed, *50 First Dates* is untroubled by the darker projections of the future of human memory and works instead to dislocate love from the territory of technologically mediated memory. This dislocation of love from technologically mediated memory, and its simultaneous cementation in subconscious embodied memory, is depicted in the scenario described in Chapter I in which Lucy has ostensibly forgotten Henry, yet she is able to reproduce his image from her subconscious through analog artistic practice. It follows that we may productively read the central project of the film to be the conceptual prying apart of love and technologically mediated memory. Put differently, *50 First Dates* works to assert love’s resistance to technological oblivion *through* its location in subconscious embodied memory – the sacred and fiercely protected territory of the human body.

What such representations of amnesia prod at is a kind of libidinal concern over the status, or better the *location*, of love amidst the ‘scientificization’ of our innermost impulses and

desires. Žižek refers to this scientificization as a process of “reflexivization and rationalization of modern life.”<sup>105</sup> Žižek argues that this reflexivization has led to a scenario that “favours a quasi-mythical ideological experience.”<sup>106</sup> It is precisely this quasi-mythical ideological experience that is facilitated by subconscious embodied memory, but not its companion, technologically mediated memory, in *50 First Dates*. In other words, it is in response to a (distinctly technological) modernity that the film insists upon Lucy’s mysterious and miraculous preservation of the essence of her love for Henry despite her amnesia. Žižek seems to speak to such defensive responses to life in the digital age when elsewhere he elucidates a certain tendency to “evoke some non-scientific ethical criterion in order to direct and posit a limitation to inherent scientific drive.”<sup>107</sup> If we map the bifurcated model of memory onto Žižek’s argument, subconscious embodied memory can be productively understood as offering a kind of non-scientific ethical alternative to the threatening scientific drive of technologically mediated memory. Thus *50 First Dates*’ constitution of love, as the ‘quasi-mystical’ and ‘non-scientific’ residue that persists despite both amnesia and technological mediation, is symptomatic of a more general cultural impulse to protect not only memory, but also the possibility of love in an age that as Turkle et al would suggest, works against our efforts to form intimate relationships with others. Ultimately, by bringing into dialogue existing discourses around, on one hand the effects of technology upon human memory and, on the other, the threat technology poses to intimacy, I have endeavoured to demonstrate the extent to which a bifurcated model of memory is always already embedded in discourses around how we live and love in the digital age.

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<sup>105</sup> Žižek, “The Myth and Its Vicissitudes,” 38.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Žižek, “Whither Oedipus?” 333.

## CONTINUING CONVERSATIONS

While the cultural concerns mentioned throughout the two chapters above constitute the ideological environment from which *50 First Dates* emerged, the nexus of issues at stake in my case study continue to pervade conversations around what it means to be a properly functioning human being in a technological world. Put differently, we appear no closer to reconciling our ever-growing reliance on technological devices and 24/7 access to the web with our simultaneous desire to articulate a kind of exceptional and essential humanness. The popular and rather aggressive insistence on a minimalist aestheticization of clean and natural ‘back-to-basics’ living in recent years, perhaps epitomized by ‘lifestyle’ brands such as Kinfolk<sup>108</sup> (which circulates both online and in print media) is one such example of our resistive response to the demands of ‘plugged in’ life in the digital age. In the summer of 2013 *The New York Times* published an article titled, “A Trip to Camp to Break a Tech Addiction,” describing the author’s experience at an adults-only summer camp run by an organization called ‘Digital Detox,’ which seeks to teach campers to “disconnect to reconnect.”<sup>109</sup> Later the same month, *The Huffington Post* released a blog post written by Larry Rosen in response titled, “You Don’t Need a Digital Detox: You Just Need to Set Limits and Boundaries.”<sup>110</sup> While Rosen does not dispute the problem – as a research psychologist he concludes that we do in fact have a problematic obsession with technology, particularly smart phones – he suggests that a ‘digital detox’ is not the solution. Instead, Rosen recommends a gradual and tightly scheduled weaning off of our devices. What is interesting about the dialogue between these two articles is that they concur that our (over)use of technology poses a problem that can only be solved by a reassertion of and

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<sup>108</sup> See <http://www.kinfolk.com/>

<sup>109</sup> Haber, n.p.

<sup>110</sup> Rosen, n.p.

recommitment to the human. Furthermore, Rosen's call for 'limits' and 'boundaries' demonstrates how, similarly to a model of subconscious embodied memory versus technologically mediated memory, the tension between the human and the technological is imagined in distinctly territorial terms. There is a call here for us to clearly articulate the boundaries of the human lest that territory be colonized by the digital. Rosen's more tentative solution also reveals the extent to which "data fasts" are understood to be rather feeble interruptions of what ultimately appears to be the unstoppable ascension of 'tech.' The two articles speak to the variably collaborative and antagonistic co-existence of an absolutely analog human domain and its perhaps necessary technologically mediated counterpart. Clearly, the debate around how we ought to resist and/or respond to our growing and apparently inevitable dependence on technology persists today. It follows that investigations into the assumptions and imperatives informing these debates, such as the one undertaken in this thesis, stand to participate in the development of the growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship on the status of the human in the digital age. This is to say that the dyadic model of subconscious embodied memory and technologically mediated memory proffered by this thesis works to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the modalities of thinking that constitute one of the most pervasive and confounding conversations of our time.

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