

Katarzyna Baran*

***PAST EFFACED. PAST RECOVERED. DREAMS
AND MEMORY CONTROL IN RECENT DYSTOPIAN
CINEMA***

Keywords: Baudrillard; cloning; dreams; dystopia; memory; the uncanny

Abstract: Utopia is considered to be a perfect state, a place where all desires and longings can be finally fulfilled. Dystopia is frequently described as a failed utopia, a place which becomes an expression of our deepest fears and concerns. Instead of granting liberty and promoting free thinking, it is a space of surveillance and oppression.

The techniques the ones in control use to exercise power and impose order are manifold. Control over memory and the past is one of them. This paper analyses two 2005 films: Karyn Kusama's Aeon Flux and Michael Bay's The Island which portray worlds with cloning as the hallmark of civilisation. The article shows how the centre of power can be challenged by recovering memory of the forbidden past. Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of dreams as a triggering force for the resistance. It draws on Freud's concept of the uncanny and Baudrillard's idea of simulation to examine the consequences of cloning as well as the significance of memories and dreams in dystopian narratives.

Early theoretical approaches to *memory* considered the concept to be rather stable and passive; famous metaphors being Plato's and Aristotle's wax table or later comparisons to an aviary, an archive or a library. Memories were symbolised either by birds or by books stored in one place, only to be retrieved when needed (Draaisma 3; Foster, 6-8). Over time, approaches to memory have changed and now it is considered an active process, a dynamic activity rather than a stable entity (Foster 8), a search, not a recuperation (Huyssen 3). It is a dialectical negotiation between the past and the present, not a mere system of storage and retrieval. The late 1980s and the early 1990s witnessed a widespread surge of interest in memory (Rossington and Whitehead 5; Misztal 2). It came to be known as *the memory boom* (Rossington and Whitehead 5; Olick 3), *commemorative fever* (Misztal 2) or *the age of commemoration* (Nora 4). Consequently, memory has become an indispensable factor for discussions in any field, including utopian studies.

The aim of this article is to establish a dialogue between two films: Karyn Kusama's *Aeon Flux* (2005) and Michael Bay's *The Island* (2005) and to show the importance of memory for dystopian research. Emphasis will first of all be on the recovery of the past to prepare the struggle for freedom and secondly, on the role of

* Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Spain

dreams as a triggering force for the resistance in dystopian narratives that involve cloning. Freud's theories of the mind and the concept of the uncanny together with Baudrillard's approach, with the emphasis on the concept of simulation shall serve as a main body of theoretical framework for the article. It shall be complemented by theories from the field of memory and utopian studies.

Dystopia and Memory Control

The meaning of the word dystopia is a combination of the Greek word *topos*, meaning *place* and the prefix *dys*, meaning *ill, bad*. Dystopian texts tend to portray highly repressive environments with individuals stripped of personal freedoms and rights. One of the main concerns of the groups in power is the absolute control of the individual. The aim of various techniques applied to enforce it is always the same: to ensure the obedience and faithfulness of the subjects and to make sure that no subversive activity takes place. The past plays a significant role in the construction of any nation or community and the understanding of common history strengthens the identity of every group (Lowenthal 44; Misztal 133-4; Connerton 1989). Therefore, the past is always a potential threat for the ruling regime as it allows citizens to draw comparisons and helps them realise that the world they inhabit used to be – and therefore can be – different. The very existence of the past serves as a proof for the possibility of a change. It confirms that history is a kinetic process, not a static concept (Ferns 119). Thus, those in power in dystopian texts often shape history so that it serves their own agenda. The elimination or modification of the past become vital endeavours for the status quo to remain unquestioned.

Memory control can take many forms. The past may be transformed by a partial or a total erasure or modification of the written data, be it books, archives or newspapers, the most renowned literary examples being George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), or Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling* (2000). Regimes in dystopian science-fiction narratives often go one step further. Instead of modifying external data only, they resort to deleting or altering their subjects' personal memories as is the case in films such as *Total Recall* (1990 and 2012) or *Code 46* (2004). The ultimate method of memory control is offered in film productions like *Dark City* (1998), *Matrix* (1999) or *Oblivion* (2013), where most of the citizens remain totally unaware of the fact that the world they inhabit is subdued by external forces. Both films analysed in this article follow a different scenario. In the worlds depicted in them cloning has become an everyday practice and not only does it undermine the basis for the formation of identities, but it also renders more complex the questions of the personal past, belonging and memories.

Uncanny Dreams

Aeon Flux depicts the Earth after a deadly virus has killed 99% of its population. A scientist, Trevor Goodchild manages to develop a cure which, however, renders the survivors infertile. In order to save humankind, he resorts to cloning. All the survivors, unaware of the fact of being constantly cloned from the recycled DNA live in Bregna, the last city on Earth ruled by the Goodchild dynasty.

At first glance, Bregna appears to be a perfect state, a utopian enclave in the midst of a dangerous and hostile jungle. Nevertheless, faith in the government's promises is undermined when inexplicable nightmares start to haunt the citizens. The dreams are unsettling as they deal with events that never happened, but which at the same time seem uncannily familiar.

Freud develops and defines the concept of *the uncanny* in a study published in 1919. According to him, the sensation of the uncanny is not caused by what is strange or unfamiliar, so much as by the known and the familiar made strange. The uncanny suggests a disturbed domesticity, the return of the recognisable in an apparently unfamiliar form. It brings to light that what should have remained hidden. The uncanny "applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open" (*The Uncanny* 132). The concept thus combines secrecy, repression, familiarity, memories and recognition. What the inhabitants of Bregna find uncanny is the gap between the familiar and the alien. Although they recognise themselves in their dreams, they cannot identify with these versions of themselves as the context and the situations are disturbingly unclear and puzzling. It is the combination of the known and the domestic, on the one hand, and the strange and the ambiguous on the other that causes perplexity and raises doubts. The dreams prompt citizens to question their personal past as well as the version of history presented to them by the ruling dynasty.

The Island takes us to an isolated underground compound whose residents are convinced that the outside world is uninhabitable due to contamination. The only place still capable of supporting life is a beautiful island, a paradisiacal natural refuge which functions as a juxtaposition to the highly controlled and technologised space of the compound. A lottery is held on a regular basis and the winners are allowed to settle there. Little do they realise that they are in fact clones of wealthy people known as *sponsors*, and that the lottery is just a cover serving to remove inhabitants from the compound in order to harvest their organs and to keep the rest of clones unaware of their real purpose. One of the residents: Lincoln Six Echo, who stands out from the other clones because of his curiosity in all matters, ventures on a quest to find answers and discovers the appalling truth. Before his escape, Lincoln is repeatedly haunted by the same disturbing dream. In this dream, he is on a state-of-the-art boat, when he suddenly falls into water. The dream is frequently followed by a series of images of his birthday, of him on a motorbike, in a car race, then in an accident. He finds himself at a loss trying to account for them. The images haunting him at night evoke the sensation of the uncanny, much like the dreams tormenting the citizens of Bregna. Although Lincoln's dreams appear plausible, they leave him puzzled and confused as he does not recollect any of the events present in them. What startles him is not the new and the unfamiliar, but much the contrary, the familiar, yet presented in a disturbingly unrecognisable context. The repetition of the same dream strengthens the sensation of anxiety and unease. According to Freud it is unintended repetition that "transforms what would otherwise seem quite harmless into something uncanny and forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and inescapable, when we should normally speak of 'chance'" (*The Uncanny* 144). In both films the nightmares introduce an irrational element in

the otherwise highly controlled and logical space, thus leading to the disruption of the established order.

Memories of the Forgotten Self

The citizens of Bregna do not realise that the troublesome images from the dreams are in fact recollections of their lives from before the cloning began. These memories pose a threat to the established order as they question the past. They are also a disruption in the citizens' perception of themselves. Aeon, the main protagonist, also suffers from nightmares. Not only does she dream recurrently about her past as Katherine, but soon she also starts to remember experiences from her past life. At the beginning she struggles against these alien, yet disturbingly familiar memories. She refuses to acknowledge this newly revealed past as her own and to accept it as a part of her identity. Her attitude changes however after she sees a photo of herself as Katherine. This version of Lacan's mirror stage might have evoked feelings of the uncanny in her, yet she seems surprisingly comfortable looking at herself as Katherine. From that moment on she slowly comes to terms with the past. She sees the newly uncovered past as a valid part of herself and starts to reshape her identity in relation to it. The position presented in the film exemplifies Allan Megill's claim on the role of memory in present day society. He believes it is not enough to know who we are at present but rather, who we have always been. What seems to be at stake is the affirmation of who we have *always* been (qtd. in Misztal 135). Far from suggesting a stable concept of identity, Megill holds that memory serves as an anchor in constructing and stabilising identities. The disclosed past provides Aeon with a wider perspective, prompts her to action and enables her to identify even further with the movement against the regime.

In dystopian texts, oppressive regimes fight against all possible rebellions by any means possible, one of them, as mentioned beforehand, being the modification of the past. According to Paul Connerton, "The more total the aspirations of the new regime, the more imperiously will it seek to introduce an era of forced forgetting" (Connerton 12). Memory control achieved through the implantation of false recollections is a common theme in dystopian science fiction films. It is present, apart from *The Island*, in productions such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Total Recall* (1990), *Dark City* (1998), *Matrix* (1999), or *Moon* (2009). In *The Island*, all the clones are controlled with a memory of a shared event of global contamination. Moreover, during their creation they are all supplied with memory imprints in a process resembling sleep teaching from Huxley's *Brave New World*. These memories are but a random combination of several basic stories, and their main aim is to supply the clones with a sense of belonging. Without such an anchor provided by the past, clones fail to develop. All their memories, except the ones related to the events after being cloned, can be categorised as *prosthetic memories*, defined by Alison Landsberg as "memories which do not come from a person's life experience in any strict sense" (190). After Lincoln's erratic sleep is detected, he is sent to Dr Merrick, the person responsible for the whole project. To his astonishment, Lincoln is able to reproduce with no effort at all a detailed technical drawing of the boat, a skill never taught to him. He also remembers the name of the boat: Renovatio. Puzzled, Dr Merrick decides to run some more tests on Lincoln.

The results arrive after Lincoln has escaped and they startle Dr Merrick even further as the scientists realise that the analysed memories belong to Lincoln's sponsor Tom, not to Lincoln himself. His identity is based on three different sets of memories: on his recollections related to the compound after being cloned, the false memories implanted in the process of cloning and finally, the memories belonging to his sponsor. While on the run, Lincoln manages to get to Tom's house and recognizes the miniature of the boat from his dreams. When faced with photos and later on when he sees his sponsor in person, he does not seem to be affected at all. Much like Aeon, he passes through the mirror stage with surprising composure.

The structure of clones' memories is reminiscent of Freud's model of the human mind. In classical Freudian psychoanalysis, the human mind can be described with the use of the *topographic theory* first outlined in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. According to it, the psyche consists of three components: the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious. The three elements can be represented by the image of a floating iceberg; the conscious mind being its clearly visible tip; the preconscious, the part right under the water surface; and the unconscious, the invisible part hidden in the depth of the waters. The conscious encompasses everything one is aware of, all the thoughts and perceptions that can be verbalised, described logically and talked about with no effort and inhibitions. The preconscious comprises all the memories, thoughts, knowledge and other mental components one is not aware of at a given moment. This part of the self is available for recollection and can be easily reached and brought back to consciousness. It is present, active, latent and accessible, even though not necessarily manifest all the time.

According to Freud, it is the unconscious that forms the most complex part of the psyche. One is not aware of its existence and thus its content cannot be recovered at will. This unawareness and impossibility of access stem from the fact that its content has been repressed for some reason. The unconscious is then not simply a part of the mind one is not aware of, but rather a reservoir of unacceptable feelings, painful memories or fears one, for some reason, does not want to face. All of them are blocked out through the process of repression. Although inaccessible voluntarily, the unconscious forms a crucial part of one's mind which is frequently influenced by it. According to Freudian psychoanalysis, the unconscious manifests itself in slips of the tongue or reactions of our body and in dreams.

The memories related to the clones' past which was not experienced by them directly but lived, in the case of *The Island* by their originals, or as in *Aeon Flux*, by their past selves, did not cease to exist. The process of cloning did not erase these recollections but rather repressed them. Much like the content of the unconscious, they are inaccessible to the conscious mind but do manifest themselves in dreams. Dreams then, serve in both films as the 'royal road' to the past.

The Original and the Copy: Simulated Uncanny Selves

In *Simulacra and Simulation* Jean Baudrillard claims that due to increasing importance attributed to the media and different types of mediation the differentiation between the real and the simulated has been disrupted. He affirms

that often it is hardly possible to distinguish between mediated and authentic experiences. Simulation annihilates the difference; it “threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (Baudrillard 3). Simulation brings them too close together, thus diminishing the importance of the real and finally eliminating it altogether.

In *The Island*, the clones are treated as mere sources of vital organs and exist only due to the fact that they are exact physical copies of their sponsors. Their lives are utterly dependent on this similarity and further, on their originals’ existence. Without sponsors the clones would have no value at all and would convert into empty signifiers. They would become copies with no original thus becoming utterly meaningless for the corporation. Nevertheless, this resemblance may turn into a doubled-edged sword and pose a threat to the sponsors. As almost exact copies, the clones undermine the dichotomy between the authentic and the unauthentic. Baudrillard (95) notes that the double is a powerful construct as long as it remains in the realm of the imaginary. Like any object of desire, once it leaves the realm of the imaginary and turns into reality, it loses all its allure and potential. Here, Baudrillard refers to Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and discusses the disappearance of aura stemming from the process of serial reproduction. Baudrillard notes that once the double is materialized, it threatens the aura attributed to the original. Furthermore, the threatening other is no longer eliminated or rejected, but rather tamed and controlled by being rendered the same. Cloning overthrows difference by promoting sameness. Thus, in the process of cloning not only is the singularity of the present moment annihilated, but also the difference stemming from the existence of the other. He states that “Neither child, nor twin, nor narcissistic reflection, the clone is the materialization of the double by genetic means, that is to say the abolition of all alterity and of any imaginary” (97).

The clones are copies of their sponsors, almost exact versions of other people. Nevertheless, they are not quite the same. They are an attempt at creating a healthier and less flawed individual. They can be seen as more perfect versions of their sponsors, creations without any deficiencies. Much like in simulation, there is no place for pretending or dissimulating here. The latter two are based on premises of presence, and on hiding what one has, while simulation is focused on absence and tries to imitate what one actually does not have. The process of cloning tries to compensate for what their sponsors lack, for their flaws and imperfections. The perfected bodies are not the only feature distinguishing sponsors from their clones. What sets them further apart is their memories. The clones do not share their sponsors’ recollections but are imprinted with false ones during their creation instead. Were it not for them, they would become far too similar to their originals. Prosthetic memories are an attempt to convert this threatening similarity into a controllable difference. The identity of clones and their sponsors is based on a dialectic between similarity and difference. The figure of the double is also present in Freud’s discussion of the uncanny (*The Uncanny* 141-3). Freud emphasizes the dangers of identification with the double as it may lead to the questioning of one’s self. He admits that the primary objective for the creation of the double was an attempt to challenge death, to fight against human mortality. He argues that “The

double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self (...)” (*The Uncanny* 142). Baudrillard also links cloning with mortality and fear of death:

What, if not a death drive, would push sexed beings to regress to a form of reproduction prior to sexuation (...) and that, at the same time, would push them metaphysically to deny all alterity, all alteration of the Same in order to aim solely for the perpetuation of an identity, a transparency of the genetic inscription no longer even subject to the vicissitudes of procreation? (96)

In his work *Liquid Fear*, Zygmunt Bauman argues that the fear of death is a basic dread that has always accompanied humankind. Given the fact that death is the only certain, unavoidable and irreversible point in the life of every single individual, it consequently questions the sense of life in general. In both films cloning is a direct response to the painful awareness of the inevitability and finality of death. In *Aeon Flux* Trevor Goodchild sees it as the only possible solution to human extinction. Society in *The Island* treats it as a possibility of prolonging their existence and avoiding illnesses and minimalising the hardships of old age. The characters in both films are ready to risk all the possible consequences of the process to be able to cheat death. The treatment of the subject of death through cloning exemplifies the determination of present day society obsessed with youth and ready to take most radical action to fight mortality.

A Struggle for a Better Future

The struggle against the oppressive regime is one of the paramount features of dystopian texts. The recovered past frequently sparks a rebellion and further resistance, and it often serves as a cradle of hope and inspiration. In both films the clones accept their memories as part of their heritage. The reclaimed past and the knowledge they gain from it makes them question the present and propels them to act and to challenge the status quo. The rebels are adamant in their search for the truth about their origins and the past. Once they realise that the reality they were made to believe to be true is in fact but a cover, they decide to discover what lies beneath it, regardless of the consequences. Their quest is satisfied when the false pretences on which their world is based are exposed.

Peter Nicholls and John Clute, science fiction critics and editors of the acclaimed *Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* observe that this paradigm is frequently found in science fiction texts. They term it *conceptual breakthrough* and define it as one of the most significant concepts in science fiction writing: “An important subset of conceptual-breakthrough stories consists of those in which the world is not what it seems. The structure of such stories is often that of a quest in which an intellectual nonconformist questions apparent certainties” (79). They also add that “[s]uch an altered perception of the world, sometimes in terms of science and sometimes in terms of society, is what sf is most commonly about, and few sf stories do not have at least some element of conceptual breakthrough” (idem). In both films the protagonists uncover the conspiracy and make the society aware of it. Nonetheless, the quest for the change of the conditions has only begun as none of the films offer an ultimate solution to the posed problems. Instead, they show a

society in the process of awakening from a slumber, at the very verge of a change, but with no ready responses. The ending is left open and the viewers are given the agency to finish the stories.

Gabriel McKee links the concept of conceptual breakthrough in science fiction to Plato's allegory of the cave (McKee 174-7). McKee compares the experience of prisoners in the cave to the life led by inhabitants of many science fiction worlds who are unaware of the mystification taking place. He claims that the moment of victory and discovery of the true conditions is much like the instance of leaving the cave and seeing beyond the shadows. He exemplifies it by films such as George Lucas's *THX 1138* (1971), Michael Anderson's *Logan's Run* (1976), Andy and Larry Wachowski's *Matrix* (1999 – 2003) and *The Island* discussed above. In this last film, after the destruction of the hologram generator that projects false images of the outside world, the clones emerge from their underground prison to see the real world for the very first time. What they face is neither a perfect paradisiacal island nor a destroyed post-apocalyptic world from their memory imprints, but a harsh reality in which they will still have to fight to fit in. Similarly, the inhabitants of Bregna in *Aeon Flux* are confronted with the reality when the zeppelin cruising over the city and serving as a storage for the DNA of all the inhabitants crashes and breaks the wall separating the city from the hostile jungle. The destruction of the wall and the zeppelin force the inhabitants to face reality. No longer can they depend on the process of cloning for the preservation of humankind. They will have to rely on nature, which has already taken its course when several women became pregnant by natural means. The incident also demystifies the outside world portrayed by the regime as utterly inhospitable as it turns out not to be so malevolent at all. As Aeon/ Katherine watches the wall shattering to pieces and hears wild birds chirping she says: "Now we can move forward. To live once for real. And then give way to people who might do it better. To live only once. But with hope" (*Aeon Flux*, 1:25:00 – 1:25:46). *Aeon Flux* can be seen as an example of a critical dystopia. Contrary to the protagonists of the classical dystopias who "do not get any control over history and the past, in the critical dystopia the recovery of the history is an important element for the survival of hope" (Baccolini 115).

The fight against an autocratic order is a hallmark feature of all dystopian texts. It can take many forms and frequently the struggle of subjects against the regime is the struggle to recover, narrate and preserve memories. The recovered past serves as an inspiration and it impels the characters to fight for their rights and for the future in which they would have agency. The retrieval of the past in dystopian narratives is usually accomplished through the recovery of a prohibited book, a discovery of some hidden archives or lost data. They all serve as gateways to the past and triggers of change in the present and future. Nevertheless, the way of reaching the past and its memories takes a different form in narratives involving human cloning. These are mainly dreams that grant access to the forgotten past and allow for the manifestation of the suppressed memories and initiate an insurrection against oppressive authorities.

Works Cited

- Aeon Flux*. Dir. Karyn Kusama. Perf. Charlize Theron, Marton Csokas. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.
- Baccolini, Rafaella. "A useful knowledge of the present is rooted in the past': Memory and Historical Reconciliation in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling*." *Dark Horizons. Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Eds. Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. New York and London: Routledge, 2003. 113-33. Print.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994. Print.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Fear*. Cambridge: Polity, 2006. Print.
- "Conceptual Breakthrough." *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*. 1999. Print.
- Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Print.
- Draaisma, Douwe. *Metaphors of Memory. A History of Ideas about the Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Print.
- Ferns, Chris. *Narrating Utopia. Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999. Print.
- Foster, Jonathan K. *Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. Joyce Crick. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.
- . *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. London: Penguin Books, 2003. Print.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. London, New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Landsberg Alison. "Prosthetic Memory. *Total Recall and Blade Runner*." *The Cybercultures Reader*. Eds. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy. New York and London: Routledge, 2000: 190-201. Print.
- Lowenthal, David. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Print.
- McKee, Gabriel. *The Gospel according to Science Fiction*. Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007. Print.
- Misztal, Barbara. *Theories of Social Remembering*. Maidenhead and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003. Print.
- Nora, Pierre. "Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory." *Eurozine*. Web 12 March 2013
<http://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2002-04-19-nora-en.pdf>
- The Island*. Dir. Michael Bay. Perf. Ewan McGregor, Scarlett Johansson. DreamWorks Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.