

Virtualizing the Real: sequelization and secondary memory in Steven Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence: A. I.*

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Steven Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence: A. I.* (2001) portrays the creation of a robotic or 'mecha' child as a living, thinking, dreaming replica of a dead human boy named David. The mecha David is not unique, but is part of a series of identical dolls which are packaged and sold off to childless families. The David dolls are created to genuinely love their 'parents', love being 'the key by which they acquire a kind of subconscious'. However, as demonstrated by the robotic David (Haley Joel Osment) on which the film focuses, the mecha subconscious is shown to be a superimposition of the subconscious of the dead boy after whom the robots are patterned, a subconscious that is dictated to by the subjectivity of its creator, and the robot's own artificial intelligence, which essentially reprograms desire through old memories. *A. I.* subsequently engages with much of the symbolic rhetoric of the unconscious by exploring 'otherness' and subjectification, each in the context of 'post-ness', as David struggles to define himself as a 'real' boy after the manner of his human predecessor with his own unique identity and subjectivity. As I go on to argue, David's 'real-ness' is defined in the film in terms of his psychological development, which moves not towards human 'real-ness' as in the story of Pinocchio, but towards the psychoanalytic 'Real' as described by Jacques Lacan.

A. I. persistently invokes a number of psychic discourses and responses, showing David's 'mother' at one point on the toilet reading

- 1 Sigmund Freud, 'Excerpts from Freud's letters to Fliess', in Elisabeth Young-Breuhl (ed.), *Freud on Women: a Reader* (London: Hogarth, 1992), p.55.

Freud on Women. The scene itself is reminiscent of Freud's famous admission of a childhood memory (recounted in *Freud On Women*) of his searching for his mother in a wardrobe and crying until he found her.¹ In Spielberg's scene, David opens the bathroom door on his mother and, smiling, says 'I found you'. In line with the way in which Freudian discourses are deployed to allude to *A. I.*'s cultural and aesthetic engagements, Spielberg's previous flirtations with Oedipal complexes (*The Sugarland Express* [1974], *E. T.* [1982], *Empire of the Sun* [1987] and *Hook* [1991]) are noticeably developed in this film into full-blown speculations on the construction of the subconscious and portraits of maternity as a point of origin in an age where the 'original' is purportedly nowhere to be found. As I will demonstrate, the tension between the 'original' and its derivative, or the sequel, informs the film's portrait of virtual subjectivity. Perhaps more pointed, however, is the film's construction of reflective surfaces and the circle as symbols of David's psychological development. I go on to discuss the film's representations of the subconscious and subjectivity in terms of the Freudian and Lacanian theories it appears to invoke.

Used by film theorists in the 1970s to theorize the spectatorial pleasures of the cinema, Lacan's notion of the gaze, at least in his early work, defined the process of a subject viewing itself in a mirror as a unified conscious self. Regarded as the first act of identification, this act of mirror gazing is essentially a *mis*-identification because the 'self' is perceived as an image, a fantasy, an 'ideal ego'. In short, the subject is mediated and constructed through the object. Lacan's definition of 'the mirror stage' is closely associated with the Imaginary, a primary stage of psychological development defined by the infant's blissful unity with its mother. Lacan determines the Imaginary as a persistent psychological undercurrent by which the ego is constructed, and through which individuals develop and perpetuate a sense of 'self' by identifying with external images. Following this stage is the Symbolic, adumbrated by the acquisition of language, the experience of loss and separation from the mother and the entrance into what Lacan calls 'the Law of the Father'.² These stages proved fruitful for film theorists seeking to define the process of identification inherent in spectatorship. Drawing parallels between the cinema theatre and the maternal womb, Christian Metz suggested that the cinematic apparatus constructs for the spectator a re-enactment of the Imaginary, while Jean-Louis Baudry emphasized the urgency for a consideration of the Symbolic in terms of the spectator's 'lack' that is perpetuated by the cinematic experience. By and large, the connections drawn between film spectatorship and psychoanalysis ignored Lacan's third psychic process, the Real, possibly because of its somewhat underdeveloped conceptualizations and elusive, complex conceits. At this point, it is enough to say that the Real can be read as a psychic remainder of the Imaginary and the Symbolic by which desire is continually repeated and re-experienced. Although the Real does *not* refer to reality, it can be understood as the process by which we create

- 2 Jacques Lacan, 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience', in *Écrits: a Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2001), pp.1–7.

reality. With this in mind, the following essay regards the concept of the Real as a vital tool by which contemporary modes of spectatorship, memory and virtual subjectivity can be accessed.

A. I. has two parallel narrative strands of equal import: a father who creates multiple robotic simulacra of his dead son, David, and a mother who ‘adopts’ a robotic simulacrum of David to fulfil her desire to continue be a mother in the event of losing her own son. In both cases, the grief of losing a child propels a parent towards substituting, or replacing, their lost human ‘original’ with a mecha ‘sequel’. Suffice to say that the mecha project is deeply flawed, not least by the rootedness of its design in post-traumatic repetition, but also by the effects of desire, which lead David to kill another robot child. Professor Hobby (William Hurt) creates David to love his ‘adoptive’ parents, but David only loves his Mommy, and that love is, as Hobby states, ‘fuelled by desire’. In turn, David’s creation is fuelled by Professor Hobby’s desire to reincarnate his son. Desire is thus conceived of in the film as circular and repetitive, as it is never satisfied. The ramifications of David’s design as a machine are that he will *always* be a child, will always be full of desire, meaning that he cannot mature and can never acquire a sense of self: unless he becomes human. It is this dilemma – David as a being of pure desire and his circular journey to become, or recover, the Real – that registers much of the desire to remember, recreate and recover in twenty-first century culture.

The film’s presentation of a robotic sequel invokes the notion of the film sequel as an act of re-viewing, or a re-living of a previous spectatorial experience. A major thrust of the following analysis is therefore towards sequelization as a process that draws upon and extrapolates the ‘return’ of the Real. Although Lacan’s remarks on the Real are sparse and altogether slippery, his suggestions of this as ‘the return, the coming back’ prompt further examination of the relevancy and development of this notion in contemporary cinema, and have been elaborated at length by Todd McGowan, Elizabeth Cowie, Hal Foster *et al* to indicate a process of psychic return, a state of pure, regressive, subconscious desire or *jouissance*.³ Slovenian Lacanian Slavoj Žižek has conducted an inexhaustive interrogation of the Real throughout his works, positing it on the one hand as the underbelly of reality, and on the other as the ‘kernel’ of trauma that cannot be represented. For me, the Real is implicitly concerned with the repetition of repressed experience that cannot be symbolized. The reason it cannot be symbolized, moreover, is because all signifiers and symbols lead only to the representation of desire, and not to the object of desire. Lacan’s description of the Real as the process by which ‘we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle’ motivates my discussion of the Real as comprehensible through the conceptual registers of sequelization. As one example, ‘the compulsion to repeat’ – the keystone of the pleasure principle – is evident in the deluge of film sequels in recent years.⁴ The pleasure principle’s involvement of *jouissance* that is beyond language

3 Todd McGowan, ‘Looking for the gaze: Lacanian film theory and its vicissitudes’, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 42, no.3 (2003), pp. 27–47. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-garde as the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Patrick Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 6–20.

4 Sigmund Freud, ‘Beyond the pleasure principle’, in James Strachey (trans. and ed.), *The Standard Editions of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 24 (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), pp.19–30.

and therefore caught up with attempts to represent the unrepresentable – an impossible feat, according to Lacan – seems to me to inform sequelization, insofar as the sequel intrudes upon our memories of the ‘original’ to rerepresent, perpetuate and rupture that ‘unrepresentable’ and entirely subjective encounter.

The commonality of sequelization is demonstrated by the resurgence of box office sequels in the twenty-first century since the rise of the sequel in the 1970s, most noticeably after the success of Spielberg’s *Jaws* in 1975. While I consider the phenomenon of sequelization in the light of *A. I.*’s reproduction of androids (the mecha), I am more interested in its ideological implications, in particular the characteristics of the sequel (deriving from the Latin *sequi*, ‘to follow’) as a trope of repetition, continuity, memory, secondariness, post-ness and desire. Sequelization in *A. I.* is played out within a context of a post-global warming, post-apocalyptic America, wherein ‘legal sanctions’ restrict pregnancies to stabilize international economies, resulting in the creation of mecha (that do not sleep, eat or deplete natural resources) as servants, workers, lovers and substitute offspring for childless parents. Mecha are thus defined by their ‘sequel-ness’ as mechanical continuations of mortal predecessors in the same moment as their very existence embodies the sense of post-ness with which this futuristic world is infused. For instance, David is the ‘sequel’ to Professor Hobby’s dead son as he is essentially the consequence, or incarnation, of an intense grief following the death of Hobby’s son. Thus while David is created in the like-ness of the dead boy, he possesses an entirely different subjectivity. The trope of the sequel therefore offers a compelling, if not problematic, reorganization of psychic processes, particularly in terms of its insistence upon the ‘return’ and compulsion to repeat that underlines the Lacanian Real.

It is precisely the composition of memories by an entity that is a *living* memory that underscores *A. I.*’s treatment of subjectivity and sequelization. The chief connection between sequelization and the Real lies in their inherent investments in memory as a remainder of a moment in the past. In terms of the Real, the remainder is the moment in which the infant is faced with its otherness in the mirror. Sequelization plays in this field of memory by creating a veritable superimposition of reconstructed memorializations and subjectivities within the framework of representation. Indeed, just as the sequel is a composite of old and new, or Self and Other, mecha are portrayed in the film as ‘bricolage’ – assemblages of old and new technologies, styles and identities. The film juxtaposes concepts of mimesis, repetition, and sequelization to posit the threat of artificiality – as demonstrated by the Flesh Fair – premised on difference, not sameness. In other words, the dread of ‘uncanny’ simulacra lies in the muddy space between the ‘real’ and its copy, the site that is ‘between two deaths’.⁵

It is my intention, first, to consider the inherent modes of desire in sequelization, the desire to remember, the desire to repeat, the desire to recreate and the desire to return, in the light of the film’s meditation on

5 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: an Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 23.

these concepts in the context of *mechanized* psychological growth. The 'regressive desire' that pervades both the Real and sequelization and which is the emotional subtext of Spielberg's film, prompts my interrogation of the Real as based solely on *jouissance*: having encountered the 'lack' of the Symbolic, might not the urge of the unconscious towards a primal return be complicit with post-traumatic scenarios, as the film suggests? How can a human-made mechanical subconscious ever transgress the infiltrations of subjectivity to subscribe to the 'truth' of the Real, and what implications does this have for readings of cinema as an apparatus of the unconscious? How far does the sequel deconstruct the process of subjectivity in the act of remembering, and to what end? In order to answer these queries, I go on to consider *A. I.* as a means by which a fuller understanding of both sequelization and the Real can be achieved.

Based on a short story, *Super-Toys Last All Summer Long*, by British novelist Brian Aldiss, *A. I.* has a considerable preproduction history that involves a series of exchanges between Stanley Kubrick and Spielberg. In awe of and influenced by Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Spielberg wrote and directed *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in 1977. Inspired by Spielberg's *E. T.: Extra Terrestrial* (1982), Kubrick purchased the rights to Aldiss's science fiction novel in 1983. Extensive planning ensued for the film's production, including 1000 sketches and an attempt to build a robotic child in the same way that Spielberg had created a robotic 'alien' for *E. T.* Kubrick's brother-in-law, Jan Harlan (also his documentarian and executive producer), oversaw the seven-year correspondence between Kubrick and Spielberg, and insisted that Spielberg helm *A. I.* (for which Harlan is credited as executive producer) when Kubrick died in 1999. The result is a conflation of Spielberg's aesthetic fascination with childhood – demonstrated by a body of almost ninety productions which predominantly recreate the childhood experience, and by the DreamWorks SKG logo, which features a child sitting in the curve of a crescent moon – and Kubrick's interest in human essence and evolution alongside the emergence of the machine. Although critical reception of the film upon its release was generally negative (mostly for its awkward juxtaposition of Kubrick's typically futuristic cynicism with another dose of Spielberg's family portraits), the film's currency as a cultural and aesthetic commentary is beginning to be recognized.

Spielberg's interest in families and childhood as founded in his own painful memories has been well documented. In Spielberg's own words,

I use my childhood in all my pictures, and all the time. I go back there to find ideas and stories. My childhood was the most fruitful part of my entire life. All those horrible, traumatic years I spent as a kid became what I do for a living today, or what I draw from creatively today.⁶

Spielberg's twentieth-century works index his childhood experience through a variety of portraits of imagination and escape, yet *A. I.* is

6 Quoted in Andrew Yule, *Steven Spielberg: Father of the Man* (London: Little, Brown, 1996), p. i.

7 Christian Metz, 'The imaginary signifier', in Philip Rosen (ed.) *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: a Film Theory Reader* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986) p. 253.

8 See Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation Website; <http://www.vhf.org> (accessed 1 June 2005).

9 Lacan, 'The mirror stage', p. 5.

resolutely self-conscious of 'the mirror of childhood' that is registered in his earlier films.⁷ In many ways, the film functions as a post-traumatic iteration – in much the same way as David performs as an incarnation of post-trauma – and reifies its awareness of that process by imagining David's psychic development as complicit with sequelization. The film's investments in memory and forgetting also signal much of Spielberg's concerns with preserving eye-witness accounts of traumatic pasts, made evident by his creation of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History (SSVH) Foundation in 1994, which was established so 'that history will not be forgotten'.⁸ Housing over 45,000 survivor testimonies, the SSVH Foundation emphasizes first-hand accounts of a traumatic past as a means by which that past will not be forgotten, and as a means by which the event can be prevented from being displaced or distanced by secondary memory. While the Foundation's archives are extremely beneficial in accessing a major point in history and culture, its existence points to the problems of representing trauma and creating an objective history. These problems are most apparent in *A. I.*, especially in relation to the construction of a virtual subjectivity and in representing the past.

Spielberg explores the possibilities of a virtual psychological process first and foremost by interrogating conceptions of virtual memory. The film charts David's development from Imaginary to Symbolic to Real through cinematographic and metonymic circularity, and a host of reflective surfaces that suggest the 'mirror stage' of David's development. As suggested earlier, the mirror stage is the point at which a child sees itself in the mirror but does not yet understand that the reflection is a reflection, nor does it comprehend the difference between Self and Other. The film's mise-en-scene is constructed entirely with this notion in mind. Having been adopted by Monica (Frances O'Connor) and Henry Swinton (Sam Robards) as a 'replacement' for their comatose son, Martin (Jake Thomas), David's first morning at the Swinton residence is spent watching Monica prepare breakfast, peering from below the stainless steel surface area that reflects – and doubles – his eyes. David's subjectivity at this stage is bound up with Monica. As David never looks at his own image in the mirror, Monica serves as his reflection, his subjectivity. Following a series of similar reflections there is the appearance of the circle at David's first meal with Monica and Henry. An overhead shot of David as he sits directly beneath the circular lighting unit symbolizes the 'wholeness' of the Imaginary and the unity that David believes to exist between him and his 'Mommy'. As Lacan indicates, the purpose of the mirror stage is 'to break out of the circle of the *Innenwelt* (inner world) into the *Umwelt* (outer world)', effectively shattering the 'mirror of childhood' in which the Self is unknown.⁹ David's complicity at the beginning of the film with the 'circle' of the mirror phase, or *Innenwelt*, is used not only to suggest that he is at the stage of 'infantile' development, but also to indicate the complicity of the mecha Self with a throng of replicated Others. In the arena of artificiality, the Self is a perpetual sequel to Other-ness.

Yet the film deliberately constructs David as virtually developing throughout the three stages of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real in order to highlight his becoming, by the end, a 'Real' boy, or a boy that permits access to and embodies the Real. David is not born to love his Mommy, but recognizes her potential and becomes programmed to love her when she decides to 'hardwire his affections' using Hobby's prescribed imprinting procedure. The scene immediately preceding David's imprinting shows him tucked up in a cocoon-like bed, with a series of hooped strip-lights encircling him from above and below. A circular window above David's head frames an exaggerated virtual crescent moon – unabashedly the DreamWorks logo – which foreshadows the fractured unity that accompanies his entrance into the Symbolic. In this scene Monica watches David in bed, visibly deciding to adopt him for good. This decision is implicitly premised on David's reincarnation of Monica's memories of her son Martin, as David effectively takes his place, occupying Martin's bed, clothes and space with a boy-ish presence. The crescent moon above Monica in this scene appears to be conjured by her decision, although it appears throughout subsequent shots to foreshadow the separation and not the unison, that she puts into effect by programming David's love. For it is the moment of David's love, his obsessive urgency to win Monica's affections, that simultaneously prompts her rejection of him. Thus when Martin recovers from his coma, a palpable rivalry emerges between the boys that changes David's love for Monica to obsessive desire. When Martin cunningly advises David that Monica *will* love him if David creeps into her bedroom in the middle of the night with a pair of scissors to cut off a lock of her hair, David acquiesces, but in doing so, he accidentally cuts Monica's eye and thus appears to be dangerous, forcing the Swintons to get rid of him.

Taking a few steps backward, however, it is possible to identify the film's suggestion of David's entrance into the Symbolic after the 'mirror phase' by Monica's imprinting, using the words 'cirrus, Socrates, particle, decibel, hurricane, dolphin, tulip, Monica, David, Monica'. The Symbolic 'implies a fixing of the subject' by figuring 'the intervention of the father as [a] third term in the dyadic, imaginary relation of mother and child', which in turn creates 'a rupture' in the psyche of the subject.¹⁰ The 'secondariness' of the Symbolic additionally points to the Self as a creation founded in post-ness. The Symbolic is also governed by the acquisition of language. Most appositely, then, the word 'Mommy' enters and dominates David's vocabulary upon his imprinting, although Henry remains 'Henry', and David's relationship with him becomes strained. From this point on, moreover, the 'wholeness' of the Imaginary is fractured, and David's reflected image is shattered. David has entered the 'law of the Father' and now that he realizes that his Mommy will die and has others to care for and love, his desire for his lost union with her is fortified. As David's object of desire, Monica is figured at this point in concert with the circle. David – his head on Monica's lap, eyes

¹⁰ Cowie, *Representing the Woman*, p. 98.

pleading – asks his Mommy how long she will live. Here a medium closeup shot captures Monica's reflection in a circular mirror, emphasizing her objectivity as a result of David's newly imprinted subjectivity. The circle, then, is additionally the articulation of the 'O' of the 'Other', represented by Monica.

What has occurred at the moment of Monica's imprinting is that David's unconscious has been activated. As Freud argues, the unconscious contains 'impressions' which, forged during childhood, are undiminished by adulthood.¹¹ Freud's description of the Mystic Writing-Pad as a psychic instrument of memory inscription renders the psychological process of remembering as comparable to a slab whose three surfaces record permanent inscriptions at the same time as 'erasing' undesirable inscriptions.¹² Comparing the two upper slabs of the pad to consciousness and the wax slab to the unconscious, Freud proposes memory as both a *tabula rasa* and as a narrative penned by the author-subject. When pressed by Martin to recall his first memory, David remembers 'a bird with big wings' that is ultimately revealed to be a statue outside Professor Hobby's Cybertronics' factory building. The first 'slab' of David's memory, then, is 'penned' by his creator, and the series of words with which Monica programmes him create another layer. From this point on, all of David's conscious activity is geared towards becoming a 'real', or human, boy. The play on 'real' throughout the film, however, implies his development as a *Real* boy, bound by the implications of this process to return to the Imaginary. From the moment of David's decision to become 'real', his unconscious becomes saturated with a desire to return to the womb. Because he is built, not born, David's unrecognized, unconscious goal is explicitly to return to the site of his origins, the site of the 'bird with big wings': the Cybertronics factory.

The film indicates the memory process as a superimposition of Real (the real event) and Imaginary (the subjective interpretation). Put differently, David's desire for Monica is conflated with his unconscious desire to return to the Cybertronics factory. Furthermore, the conflation of subjectivities that have created his unconscious, or the means by which he creates his own reality, means that, to a degree, David is his *own* object of desire, which contributes enormously to the circularity of desire. This dichotomy is explored in early psychoanalytic readings of spectatorship. Reading the 'persistence of the exclusive relation to the mother, desire as a pure effect of lack and endless pursuit, the initial core of the unconscious' of the Imaginary as indicative of the spectatorial experience, Metz determines the Imaginary as 'undoubtedly reactivated by the play of that *other mirror*, the cinema screen, in this respect a veritable psychical substitute' (his emphasis).¹³ In other words, the cinema as 'other' becomes a substitute, or surrogate, for the irrevocable Imaginary. Yet both Baudry's observations and Metz's comments are based on a consideration of suture, or a system of shot/reverse shot, that occurs between spectator-subject and film-object. As Kaja Silverman suggests of the shot/reverse shot process,

11 Sigmund Freud, 'A note on the mystic writing-pad', in Strachey (trans. and ed.), *The Standard Editions*, vol.19, p. 213.

12 Ibid., p. 227.

13 Metz, 'The imaginary signifier', p. 250.

14 Kaja Silverman, 'Suture', in Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, p. 219.

15 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Norton, 1981), p. 282.

the viewer of the cinematic spectacle experiences shot 1 as an imaginary plenitude, unbounded by any gaze, and unmarked by difference. Shot 1 is thus the site of a *jouissance* akin to that of the mirror stage prior to the child's discovery of its separation from the ideal image which it has discovered in the reflecting glass.¹⁴

By figuring David as both the 'eye-subject' and object within the 'reflecting glass', the film posits the Real as an impossible destination specifically because, at this stage, subjectivity and objectivity are inseparable. David as both 'eye-subject' and mirror is further denoted by a shot during the scene in which Monica abandons David. Driving to a woodland area, Monica tells David she has to leave him with Teddy, the super-toy Martin gave to David. As Monica drives off, David's reflection is captured by the circular wing-mirror as the car pulls away, making him appear progressively smaller. The reflection, carried off into the distance, reinforces Monica as David's reflection, his narcissistic 'Other'. In this connection, the circular wing mirror frames David as *l'objet petit a*, the little other or 'o', the signifying mark of the desire-drive.¹⁵ David is thus cinematographically imagined as the film's circularity, the signifier of desire, the embodiment of the 'return' underlying the sequel.

In addition to desire and 'return', notions of 'secondariness' and inferiority are complicit with sequelization. In effect, David is rejected because he is neither Monica and David's 'real' son, nor is he a 'real' boy. The machine/human or mecha/Orga axis throughout the film contributes to the sequel's inherent disappointment, otherness and latent artificiality. The film's reference to an earlier text (unmentioned in Aldiss's short story), Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*, connects David to his textual counterpart in the context of the sequel. At Martin's (scheming) request, Monica reads *Pinocchio* to the two boys. In Collodi's novel the puppet Pinocchio aims to become 'real' in the sense that he desires to be an authentic, original and human. Martin makes the parallels between David and Pinocchio obvious to David in order to undermine his 'eligibility' for Monica's love. Thus the message David receives from this story is that love is coterminous with real-ness. As Martin has woken from his coma and returned home, David has been swiftly relegated from his position as substitute son to Martin's toy. In an earlier scene, Martin asks what 'super-toy stuff' David can do – if, for instance, he can walk on the walls or ceiling. David says that he cannot, and asks Martin if he can. 'No', Martin responds, 'because *I'm real*'. It is therefore clear, that despite the general advantage of super-toys over humans in many ways – such as intelligence, agility and manual dexterity – the emphasis here is on real-ness. 'Real', or human, is 'original', and is therefore unquestionably unique and superior.

Yet the division between reality and irreality is so muddled in the film that the notion of 'originality' is shown to be slowly dying. The film supports this observation by its inclusion of a 'Flesh Fair' at which

humans gather at an arena – much like a gladiatorial Colosseum – to watch mecha being ritualistically destroyed. Humans, or ‘orga’ as they are named in reaction to ‘mecha’, are of course ‘original’, but to validate that originality, mecha must be consistently undermined. ‘We are alive’, the hostess reminds the crowd, ‘and this is a celebration of life’. Mecha are melted with boiling oil, shot from a cannon into rotating blades, and ripped limb from limb. In actuality, the Flesh Fair is not a celebration of life, but the demonstration of fears connected to the potential ‘real-ness’ of mecha. Because of their ‘real-ness’, or accurate representation of human appearance, mecha appear to pose a threat. To orga, mecha signify death, or the death of originality, and thus the death of humanity.

David’s human appearance confuses a number of orga, and ultimately saves his skin. The host speaker, Lord Johnson-Johnson (Brendan Gleeson), drags David to the centre of the stadium, ready to be burned to death. David cries ‘Don’t burn me! I’m David!’, echoing the cry of the wood in Collodi’s novel that later ‘becomes’ Pinocchio:

[Master Cherry] grasped the hatchet quickly to peel off the bark and shape the wood. But as he was about to give it the first blow, he stood still with arm uplifted, for he had heard a wee, little voice say in a beseeching tone: ‘Please be careful! Do not hit me so hard!’¹⁶

16 Carlo Collodi, *Pinocchio*, trans. E. Harden (London: Puffin, 1996), p. 3.

Collodi’s narrative continues to report how Master Cherry gives the piece of wood to his childless friend, Geppetto, who makes himself a marionette named Pinocchio that will dance, fence and turn somersaults. Although named after Professor Hobby’s son, David is also named after Michelangelo’s marble statue ‘David’, which was (like Pinocchio) sculpted from an odd-shaped material (marble) that had previously been rejected by other artists. Michelangelo’s ‘David’, the mecha David and indeed Pinocchio are all characterized by rejection. In addition, David and Pinocchio share a desire for originality. David goes so far as to disengage himself from his textual counterpart, crying ‘I’m not Pinocchio! Don’t let me die! I’m David!’ as though the fact of his *difference* and (false) individuality is a requisite for life.

David’s desire to be ‘one of a kind’ is founded, of course, on his desire to be loved by Monica. When Gigolo Joe (Jude Law) tells David that orga (humans) hate mecha, David retorts, ‘my mommy doesn’t hate me! Because I’m special! And unique! Because there’s never been anyone like me before, ever!’ David, at this point, is the sequel that articulates what other sequels point to in recent years: that despite their derivative condition, they aspire to and claim ‘originality’ because of particularly charismatic and distinctive traits. For example, one of the innumerable ‘cognitive simulacra’ in *I, Robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004) insists that he is unique, and that the other robots ‘look like me but none of them are me’. In *The Matrix* trilogy (The Wachowski Bros., 1999, 2003), Neo (an obvious anagram) is ‘the one’, despite having six Messiah-like ‘predecessors’, while his antithetical ‘double’, Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving), has endless ‘copies’ of himself, or ‘me *two*’. The obsession

17 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994).

18 Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.132. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 50.

19 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 4.

with 'one of a kind' registers the sequel as a symptom of *difference*. As Gilles Deleuze points out, however, difference is ineluctably correspondent with repetition, suggesting the sequel as difference reified only by dialogue with its predecessors.¹⁷ Like the Imaginary, which fuses absence and presence, the sequel is ultimately bound up with difference as a dialogue between history and memory.

In this connection, the notion of the sequel organizes the film's presentation of historical repetition. The racist and fascist sentiments of the *Flesh Fair* are figured as a continuation of Nazi regimes, whilst the graphic destruction of mecha is imagined as another Holocaust. 'History', as one of the mecha asserts, 'repeats itself'. The trauma of the twentieth century Holocaust is shown to be repeated, but as a sequel, a continuation. It is precisely the film's treatment of historical repetition that sets the sequel apart from repetition and, in so doing, underscores the Real as repetition. As Hal Foster suggests, 'as missed, the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated, indeed it *must* be repeated'. He goes on to say that 'repetition is not reproduction', but instead 'serves to *screen* the real understood as traumatic'. However, 'this very need also *points* to the real, and at this point the real *ruptures* the screen of repetition' (his emphasis).¹⁸ David is not a simple mecha repetition; he 'screens' the traumatic traces of his own circumstances of reproduction. The dialogues between cultural consciousness, historical repetition and psychic *jouissance* in *A. I.* can be read, therefore, as iterations of a cultural anxiety borne of past traumas, which are notably played out in the shape of what I call 'prevention-compulsion' in Spielberg's subsequent production, *Minority Report* (2002). The dilemma of the sequel, or the arena of 'post-ness', is indeed the 'impossibility' of the Real, as the urge not only to remember but also to externalize or incarnate the process of memory – the subconscious – leads in the film to a series of problematic representations, for example, the creation of innumerable 'Davids' instead of a variety of 'unique' mecha children, which ultimately instils in David such a strong desire to be different that he resorts to murder to defend his subjectivity and 'real-ness'. In western society, similar problems are apparent in terms of what Andreas Huyssen calls 'a hypertrophy of memory', creating an overabundance of past-ness and, as evidenced by architecture, art (and film, I would argue), a dichotomy of palimpsest and lacunae.¹⁹ In *A. I.*, the fear of forgetting is so great that images of the past, images of the *dead*, create an uncanny sense of ever-present absence. Evocations of the future of western society as we know it thus appear in the film in the context of the struggle between originality and representation, to comprehend the effects of 'post'-ness, or the virtualizing of the Real.

As the sequel reifies, the Real is forever displaced from historical repetition, and is wholly distinct from secondary memory. Dominick LaCapra uses the term 'secondary memory' to discuss representations of second-hand experience, or what Huyssen explains as a symptom of 'second generation' Holocaust survivors who are compelled to

20 Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 20–21. Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, p. 135.

21 Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: a Feminist Introduction* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin Australia, 1990), p. 34.

22 Quoted in Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Macey (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 116.

23 Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, p. 136.

represent their experiences of their parents' Holocaust memories and post-traumatic symptoms.²⁰ 'Secondary memory' is also a technological term, used to denote a computer's long-term memory system. Composed of a three-tiered system of cache (immediate memory), primary memory (main 'functional' memory) and secondary memory, computer memory is a technological configuration of the three-tiered psychic system of Freud's Mystic Writing pad. David is an expression of both kinds of memory: his virtual subconscious has its origins in computer memory, yet the emotional subtext of his existence is 'second generation' expression. In many ways, David is an attempt to reconnect with the Real, which is perceivably the major dynamic of 'second generation' representations: to reveal the Real behind the mask of memory. As Elizabeth Grosz puts it; 'The Real . . . is not the same as reality; [for] reality is lived and known through imaginary and symbolic representations'.²¹ Yet in attempting to discover the Real, one must contend with the fact that no 'eye-witness' account of the past can ever reveal the Real in its entirety. Secondary representations thus reorganize second-hand memories 'in a certain manner [which] operates in a more satisfactory way, has a positive result, but still leaves out what one does not understand: the Real'.²²

Spielberg's 'Real' is the Holocaust. Both *Schindler's List* (1993) and *War of the Worlds* (2005) evidence Spielberg's preoccupation with the Holocaust, and *A. I.* indicates a struggle in representing or comprehending the 'real' historical event. In fact, both *A. I.* and *Minority Report* can be read in terms of a self-consciousness of the problems posed by secondary memory, specifically the attempt to come to terms with an event that has shaped Spielberg's cultural identity and historical understanding, but only at the level of second-hand experience. The question posed by both films is how to represent a personal mode of experience within the Real's network of associated secondary memories, or, as Huyssen argues: 'How to represent that which one knows only through representations and from an ever-growing historical distance?'.²³ This dilemma is also apparent in *Minority Report*, which in some ways can be read as a 'sequel' to *A. I.* because of its engagement with secondary memory.

Like *A. I.*, *Minority Report* portrays the grief of a father, John Anderton (Tom Cruise), who has lost his son. Following the 'vision' of a psychic female Pre-Cognitive (Samantha Morton), John tracks down his son's killer in room number 1006 at a local hotel. Finding the room empty, he rotates the last digit on the door of the room to reveal that it is actually 1009. Turning to the door opposite, John finds the 'real' room 1006, as well as his suspect. One of Spielberg's early encounters with the Holocaust pointedly informs this scene. Relatives of the Spielberg family from Poland and the Ukraine had died during the Holocaust, and some survivors shared their experiences with the young Spielberg in ways that echo throughout this scene. As Andrew Yule describes the encounter: 'Only one aspect of the meeting remained vivid in his mind: one of the

group performed a magic trick with his concentration camp tattoo, the “6” twisted round to make a “9”.²⁴ The evocation of Spielberg’s second-hand experience of the Holocaust in this scene – or the portrait of a secondary memory in a scene that portrays the revision of a memory of the future – suggests that the Real is only ever ‘accessible’ as a symbolic interpretation, as a ‘sequel’ to the event forever complicit with the exigencies of subjectivity and the subconscious.

Nonetheless, the creation of mecha and the mecha ‘Holocaust’ portrayed in *A. I.* index representation politics as a necessary evil in the preservation of subjectivity, culture and originality. Indeed, the ‘primitive monsters that could play chess’ of the early modern period created by Voltaire, Jacques de Vaucanson *et al.* were not merely designed to duplicate the female ability to give birth or to function as technological sequels, but to recreate and return to the Imaginary by producing sequels in the image of the Mother: the site of all origins. In the twenty-first century, however, that return is informed by the Real as facilitated by the preservation of memory. The Real’s ‘impossible wholeness of self’ is threatened here by the bricolage-robots, while the ‘lack-of-being’ that comes on the heel of maternal unity is reflected by mecha who are neither alive nor dead.²⁵ Yet it is this very ‘in-between-ness’ of mecha – the fact that they will not die – which indicates their imbrication in memorialization. As Gigolo Joe predicts, ‘when the end comes, all that will be left is us’. Social amnesia is the death of memory, and the death of memory is the end of origins. In the event of impending apocalypse, the most important aspect of humanity in this film appears to be originality, in concert with a clarion call for remembrance.

The film’s constructions of the Imaginary point to the quest for originality as inseparable from the retrieval of the Mother-as-origin, and as inseparable from the Real. In keeping with this notion, the design of this society is overtly feminized and maternal. When David and Joe are eventually set free from the Flesh Fair, they make a course for Rouge City (a metropolized, post-postmodern sequel to the Moulin Rouge in Paris) in order to find the Blue Fairy. The bridges connecting the island of Rouge City to the mainland pass through the open mouths of large female heads, recalling Lacan’s comments on the ‘the abyss of the feminine organ *from which all life emerges*, the *gulf of the mouth*, in which everything is swallowed up, and no less the image of death in which everything comes to its end’ (my emphasis).²⁶ While the brain of the female mecha, Sheila (Sabrina Grdevich), in the film’s opening scene is accessed through her open mouth, the heart of (female) mecha society is found at the other end of the bridge in Rouge City. Buildings shaped as large phalluses were removed to maintain the film’s PG-13 rating, although edifices in various forms of the female body (and named ‘Mildred’) abound. This is ostensibly the home of the virtual ‘mother’, the place where, as Joe puts it, ‘the ones who made us are always looking for the ones who made them’. Essentially the desert of the Real, Rouge

25 Jacques Lacan, ‘The instance of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud’, in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds), *Literary Theory: an Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 190–205.

26 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–55*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 164.

City features numerous representations of fetishized females and thus underscores the absence of the maternal figure, and is paved therefore with disunity, artificial 'sequels' and the 'lack' of Real-ness. The excessive presence of the virtual mother and the absence of the 'real' mother indicate at this point the displacement of originality by 'secondary' originality, which, although 'immortal', retains only a remembered trace of the Real, and never the Real itself.

David's condition and the world around him suggest the Real as a *resistance* against futurity, a regressive return that results not in the reconstruction of infantilism, but in mechanical reproduction, cryogeny and an apocalypse of reality. Frozen in time, David is the unconscious incarnate, a being entirely 'fuelled by desire', but infinitely unable to satisfy that desire. David may further be perceived as *innocence* incarnate, the articulated suspension of a pre-Oedipal era from which all adult desires originate. As Freud suggests, 'our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused'.²⁷ Essentially composed of phantasies, these memories project adult desires upon infantile experiences. The urges of adulthood are interpreted by Freud as giving shape to unintelligible childhood encounters, yet it is further conceivable that infantile memories – suspended forever in the perpetual summer of the unconscious – are projected by an adult subject in the form of wishes and dreams. Charged with 'screen memories', the unconscious seeks 'to get itself represented by a subject who is still unaware of the fact that he is representing to himself the very scene of the unconscious where he is'.²⁸ Projected desires, as David signifies, are memories scripted upon the unconscious that are replayed throughout maturity by adult phantasies. In David's case, desire and memory are one. His 'love' is no more than the dichotomous repetition of repressed 'memories' (such as the 'bird with big wings', which is revealed to be synonymous with the Blue Fairy) that are configured as desires, and vice versa. Thus, David's journey to the Blue Fairy culminates in both an unconscious return to the place of his origins – underlined by Professor Hobby's admission, 'I guess that makes me your Blue Fairy' – and to the destination of his dream. The playing out of David's imprinted 'memories' suggests the sequel as the perpetuation of remembering, which is essentially rooted in the present tense. However, the modes of duplication in the world of *A. I.* have created a ruptured sense of presence, and as a consequence a 'superimposed' order of past-ness and futurity has replaced present-ness. The portrait of 'Manhattan' as 'the end of the world' suggests this most strongly, for the city is entirely submerged under water – 'full of weeping' – and appears to be drowning in its own reflection.

After encountering Dr Know in Rouge City, Joe, Teddy and David make their getaway in an amphibio-copter to Manhattan. Flying past the decaying flame of the Statue of Liberty (the only part of the statue that is not submerged), Manhattan's skyline appears as a dystopic relic flooded by tears, an oceanic terrain with echoes of Kevin Costner's *Waterworld*

27 Sigmund Freud, 'Screen memories', in Strachey (trans. and ed.), *The Standard Editions*, vol. 3, p. 322.

28 Jean Baudry, 'The apparatus: metapsychological approaches to the impression of reality in the cinema', in Rosen (ed.) *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, p. 317.

29 Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.116.

30 Sigmund Freud, 'The uncanny', in Strachey (trans. and ed.), *The Standard Editions*, vol. 17, p. 235.

(1995). David's destination features colossal statues of lions that 'weep' into the ocean below. This is the realm of the Imaginary, the desert of the Real flooded by recreations of and returns to the mirror phase, resulting in uncanny manifestations of narcissism (mecha), and an apocalyptic realization that the 'mother', or, more specifically, the maternal womb, cannot be recreated or re-entered. Landing inside the Cybertronics building, David finds a door inscribed with the refrain from W. B. Yeats' apocalyptic poem *The Stolen Child*. Therein David finds 'another who is me', another 'David', his identical simulacral twin.²⁹ David stares rigidly at his doppelgänger, yet the other 'David' does not flinch at his uncanny clone. Freud's notions of the uncanny or 'double' self as a 'harbinger of death' seem to be played out here, for David's immediate response is aggressive fear that there exists a rival for his mommy's affections.³⁰ 'You can't have her', David whispers, before swiping a steel lamp at his opponent's head and bashing his motherboard 'brains' in. An overhead shot captures David, still swinging at thin air, beneath a circular lighting structure similar to the one at the Swinton residence, but with a difference: this time the circle is not whole. It is composed of two crescents, not quite joining in the middle, signalling the *double* fracture of the Imaginary (emphasizing the meeting of the two Davids and the consequence of this encounter). The double 'C' further harks back to the clinic at the film's opening in which Martin was contained during his five-year coma. As Monica enters the clinic the camera pauses momentarily on the door sign that reads 'Cryogenics'. The 'C' in 'Cryogenics' resembles a crescent moon, and beside it another crescent, facing the opposite way, pre-empting the double crescent figured in the 'double Davids' scene. The moon denotes the perpetuation of childhood or the perpetuation of the *memory* of childhood, which is in turn suggested as the origin of all desire.

In the next room of the Cybertronics factory David finds rows of unprogrammed 'Davids' hanging along the walls. Finished Davids, as well as Darlenes, are packed in boxes that are headlined with the caption 'At Last A Love Of Your Own'. Echoing Ripley's horrifying discovery in *Alien: Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997), where she finds a series of botched attempts to 'revive' her genetically (including a grotesquely deformed twin, whom she kills), the mechanical sequels seriously undermine David's aspiration to be 'one of a kind'. 'You're the *first* of a kind', Professor Hobby offers, yet the simulacra articulate the original's irreplaceability and, in contrast, the utter insignificance of the sequel.

The mystery behind David's 'bird with big wings' memory is explained by an inchoate David-doll that faces a window behind which stands the bird-like Cybertronics effigy. Although David's Blue Fairy is yet to be found at this point, a shot capturing David as he presses his head inside the unfinished face of the doll configures *David* as the Blue Fairy, as blue lights behind the eye sockets of the doll light up David's eyes as he peers through towards the window. Moreover, the palimpsest created by David and his undeveloped twin stresses David

as both original and sequel, his own shot/reverse shot, a 'link' in a series of manufactured images. As foreshadowed by shots of David through pleated glass, the palimpsest quality of the David-doll shot ratifies David's residence in immortal youth, an existence wherein Joe's (final) comment 'I am . . . I was' is not possible. David's condition is not founded on a perpetual Imaginary as was intended, but instead is the materialization of an infinite Real, a continually recycling apocalypse. This is because David is nothing more than someone else's memory; his own memories are palimpsests upon a text that has already been penned. In an earlier scene, the camera pans across a shrine of photographs of David and his father, culminating with a large photo of David (at the age that he is cloned) on Professor Hobby's desk with a plaque that reads 'In Loving Memory of David'. By creating a simulacrum that is essentially outside time and thus will not mature or die, Professor Hobby incarnates the memory of his son without recourse to mortality. David is programmed not only to love, but also never to *forget*.

Perhaps to indicate the triadic phases of psychological construction that are each initiated by and concomitant with the womb state, David is submerged underwater no less than three times throughout the film. The first time, David accidentally falls into the Swinton's outdoor pool, dragging Martin with him. When Martin is rescued, David is left on the pool floor, arms outstretched, abandoned before he is finally and *conclusively* abandoned by the Swinton family. The second occasion of submersion occurs after David's encounter with his double. Initially sitting many storeys above the ocean in Manhattan, David hurls himself into the sea in what appears to be a suicide attempt. Once under the water, he finds New York's theme park Coney Island replete with a *Pinocchio* set and – as luck would have it – a Blue Fairy statue. Once more, the presence of the circle dominates the scene in the form of a gigantic Ferris wheel beside the Blue Fairy that will eventually trap David underwater. At this point, however, David only catches a glimpse of the Blue Fairy before Joe swoops to his rescue. When Joe is ultimately plucked from the amphibio-copter by the police, David and Teddy begin their final descent towards the Blue Fairy. The narcissistic overtones at this point are obvious, reinforced by a slow superimposition of David's reflection and the image of the Blue Fairy statue on the amphibio-copter glass. However, when David gazes at the surface of the water (or, indeed, *any* reflective surface), the reflection he sees staring back at him is not his own face, but the Other, the object of his desire, hence (in part) David's reaction to his 'other' in Professor Hobby's study. The shattered glass in this earlier scene is congruent with the 'shattering' of the Imaginary, the first of a dyadic 'shattering' of the mirror phase that accompanies David's two-fold journey to his origins: to discover Professor Hobby, and to find the Blue Fairy, who emulates Walter Benjamin's comments on the 'Angel of History', whose face is turned to the past whilst being jettisoned in to the future.³¹ Indeed the Blue Fairy shatters in a later scene and, after the apparent redawning of the Ice Age, the world of which David is the sole

31 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), p. 259.

‘living’ memory is in a state of splinter, a post-apocalyptic secondary Real.

When David and Teddy are rescued from their sunken ‘cage’ by robots, it is apparent that New York, and indeed the world, has been encased in ice. Pre-empting Roland Emmerich’s *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), which imagines a futuristic New York that is flooded by the ocean before being caught in the (re)commencement of a post-millennial Ice Age, New York at this point evokes Rem Koolhaas’ description of ‘Manhattanism’ as ‘a factory of manmade experience, where the real and natural [have] ceased to exist’.³² For as the robots inform David, mankind is no more; David is the sole ‘enduring memory’ of human beings. At this point architectural icons of New York (such as the Chrysler building) peer above ice dunes, reduced to shattered pieces that signify the deconstructed subjectivity that accompanies post-ness.

The film’s representation of New York as a shattered, post-traumatic space is retrospectively concomitant with post-9/11 discourse and, in this context, with the modes of ‘doubling’ and sequelization that have occurred throughout the film. Audiences in Australia, Germany and the UK viewed the film forty-eight hours after 9/11 (at its 13 September 2001 release). As I recall, the film seemed to capture the world’s emotional landscape at that moment, charged with uncertainty and, as Jean Baudrillard later commented, ‘symbolic significance’. In the context of 9/11, David’s destruction of his twin pertains to ‘the rhetoric of the mirror’, and to Baudrillard’s conviction that ‘only the doubling of the sign truly puts an end to what it designates’.³³ Focusing – perhaps rather coldly – on the facelessness and doubled identity of the twin towers, Baudrillard’s comments reflect the uncanny ramifications of the 9/11 tragedy. Gregory T. Esplin’s observations are worth repeating at length:

The uncanny is reflected even in the details of the World Trade Centre’s destruction: everything related to the incident seems [to] come in doubles. It occurred on the date in which the number one is repeated twice: 11. The United States President in ‘01 was George Bush. Not the first one, but the second: Bush II. . . . A feeling of eerie repetition also surrounds September 11, since this was the second time Islamic fundamentalists attacked the WTC, the first being the 1993 truck bombing of the North Tower which left six dead but failed to bring down the structure.³⁴

A. I.’s engagement with the ‘double-ness’ of the World Trade Centre – and, inadvertently, with 9/11 – is reflected in the enduring presence of the twin towers amidst New York’s decaying structures. The towers function here to symbolically register the apocalypse of this world caused by the proliferation of uncanny representations or replicas of a lost original. At the end of the world, the Real is the existence of the double.

32 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: a Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1994), p. 10.

33 Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 41, 43, 44.

34 Gregory T. Esplin, ‘Double or nothing: the uncanny state of post-9/11 America’, *Philament: an Online Journal of the Arts and Culture*, vol. 6 (July 2005); http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/publications/philament/issue6_pdf/ESPLIN_Double%20or%20Nothing.pdf (accessed 1 June 2005).

35 James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-apocalypse* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.26; Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (eds), *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida & Psychoanalytic Reading*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 52.

By the film's end, David has become the signifier of this lost original, or of the human race. To use James Berger's excellent term, David functions at this point as 'a traumatic-apocalyptic inscription' upon the cinematic palimpsest of New York, and, for audiences witnessing the film's pre-9/11 release in New York, serves as the 'letter' Lacan describes as arriving 'in reverse form'.³⁵ David is the memory of that trauma 'posted' from the future, *returning* to his destination in past-ness. The film's cinematography confirms this notion, for David's first appearance in the film is photographed in such a way as to liken him to the slender robots that rescue him in the future. As such, David is a memory sent to the past from a catastrophic state of post-ness in order to screen the moment of trauma. David's construction thus reifies the 'sequel' as a symbol of post-trauma, an attempt to get over the past, inscribing new identities, change and cultural progress on a culture weighted with memories of the Holocaust.

In this light, the Real appears coterminous with trauma and apocalypse. In Berger's words, 'apocalypse and trauma . . . both refer to shatterings of existing structures of *identity* and *language*, and both effect their own erasures from memory and must be reconstructed by means of their traces, remains, survivors, and ghosts: their symptoms' (my emphasis). The Real as an unrepresentable remainder correlates with this reading as the re-enactment of a subconscious past throughout perpetuity. It is in this manner that David achieves the wish he has harboured for two millennia. One of the robots that save David recounts a project devised to recreate mankind with samples of human DNA (like Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* [1993]), and informs David that they also attempted to retrieve a memory trace of human existence. As a result, they discovered that space-time stored information about every event that had ever occurred. The lock of hair that David successfully retrieved from Monica's head is still held in Teddy's pocket and, using this sample, the robots are able to achieve David's wish. That is, however, until Monica falls asleep, for the experiment conducted by the robots proved that 'resurrectees' stay alive only as long as they are conscious. David's return to his childhood is a potently psychic event, for the Swinton residence and Monica are reconstructed according to David's memories, yet each seems different to him. Once again he tells Monica 'I found you' and their entire day together is essentially a reconstruction of David's memories: making Monica coffee, just the way she likes it ('you never forget, do you?'), painting his memories of the Flesh Fair, Gigolo Joe and the amphibio-copter, and celebrating his birthday (recalling the event at Martin's birthday, which prompted Monica's abandonment of David). What is being suggested at this point is that the reconstruction of David's memories results in a forgetting, or screening, of the trauma of Monica's abandonment, in tandem with the full exposure of the Real. David is essentially a post-apocalyptic inscription insofar as he is coded to re-present and re-live the past, and therefore both embodies and screens past-ness. The trope of the sequel functions in much the same

manner. By infringing upon the memory of the 'original' and continuing or adding to that memory, sequelization perpetuates the act of remembering, which is an act grounded in the present. David dies at the end of the film when he returns to the origins of his memory, when the Real is made possible, yet the suggestion is that his death is a kind of life, or a return to the virtual subconscious.

In conclusion, the notion of the Real as both a remainder of and an urge to repeat the Imaginary informs the film's construction of a virtual subconscious, insofar as the virtual is removed from human reality and is entirely preoccupied with the sense of absence and reconstruction. Moreover, the repetition of the Real appears in David's case to create, at a very subconscious level, every experience and urge as a repetition of the 'thing itself', of his object of desire, which, as I have demonstrated, is essentially himself. David's repetitious perpetuation of his own subjectivity – as complex a notion as it appears – creates narrative trajectories of interrelated events and identities that are ultimately past-bound. This is because David is programmed to be past-bound; he is the sequel that persistently looks back at the past whilst reconstructing that past in the future. The *fort/da* dichotomy underscoring Freud's thesis of the pleasure principle – and the memory of his mother in the wardrobe – is very much part of the sequel's investment in reconstruction. Yet the sequel's self-consciousness of reconstruction and memory as entirely subjective scenarios interrogate contemporary memory politics – made evident by 'public memory' spaces – by repositioning the subject in remembering. David's virtual subjectivity and memory are secondary insofar as they continue the memories of his creator and 'original', which also frame David's own memories. The symbolic domination of the circle, then, serves to indicate the process of the Real in the virtual landscape as neither a straightforward shot/reverse shot dialogue nor a projection of desire, but as the continual repetition of memory, the origin or 'kernel' of which lies in the terrain of the Imaginary.