



## Contemporary Memory Loss Narratives: Romanticized or Realistic?

Terry Creagh, Dundalk Institute of Technology, [terrycreagh7@gmail.com](mailto:terrycreagh7@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

The representation of memory loss in cinema and its impact on the perception of individuals with memory loss diseases is a recurring topic among scholars. Some scholars view cinema as having a particular influence on the way memory loss diseases are understood and interpreted by the majority of society. These interpretations emerge from an engagement with cinema, which presents material relating to memory loss “in the guise of entertainment” (Capstick, Chatwin & Ludwin, 2015, p. 7). Drawing on an analysis of a selection of 21st-century films and older titles, I draw conclusions regarding ideas on the portrayals of memory loss in cinema and present a framework that ascertains the authenticity of these films.

**Keywords:** memory loss; authentic; sanitized; amnesia; Alzheimer’s disease; dementia



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## Contemporary Memory Loss Narratives: Romanticized or Realistic?

### Terry Creagh

Memory loss is a major aspect of many films with narratives centred on memory and a central topic of discussion for scholars (Casado-Gual, 2015, pp. 389-401; Morris 2010, pp. 146-156). Using mental health and media scholar Gary Morris's (pp. 146-156) writing on using cinema to "foster empathy" in audiences as a reference point, Andrea Capstick, John Chatwin and Katherine Ludwin (2015, p. 17) argue that films help society to empathize with people living with memory loss. However, they identify what they see as a flaw in Morris's (pp. 146-156) argument, stating that mainstream film's impetus to have audiences empathize with characters may come at the cost of authenticity. The facts of what a person with dementia actually experiences can be lost in sentimentality (Capstick et al., pp. 17-18). They conclude that the portrayal of dementia in much of mainstream cinema is inherently problematic. The problem arises from the fact that mainstream films are made primarily to entertain audiences rather than to create accurate representations of memory loss diseases (Capstick et al., pp. 20, 24-25). These authors view some films about dementia as functioning to spread and create an image of people with dementia as less than fully human (Capstick et al., p. 11). They and other scholars (Scheidt, Vanden Bosch, & Kivnick, 2013, pp. 172-173) write of cinematic portrayals of dementia as failing due to what they perceive as a lack of "nuance" and sensitivity in

representing the disease. However, they do credit mainstream cinema and its allure with helping to destigmatize dementia. John Seamon's (2015, pp. 212-213) ideas on memory loss narratives emphasizes the role of memory in understanding the past and the manner in which it serves as a foundation for relationships in both reality and cinematic narratives.

There is a level of consensus among theorists (Morris, 2010, pp. 146-156; Seamon, 2015, pp. 216-217) that telling the story of individuals with a memory loss disease in cinema necessitates a concern with authenticity in terms of reflecting the reality of these conditions. Determining whether contemporary narratives dealing with themes centred around the loss of memory are romanticized or realistic is necessary as this question is a key element of these debates. This paper aims to identify a shift in contemporary memory loss narratives towards more authentic portrayals than depicted in the past and to recognize the traits of 21st-century portrayals of memory loss. The paper presents a framework for measuring authenticity that deduces how this striving for authenticity influences characters, narratives, and cinematic language in contemporary memory loss films. "Authenticity" in cinema is a difficult quality to define as films are ultimately works of fiction. Gauging the authenticity of a given title eventually involves a level of interpretation (Hereniko, 2019, p. 66). This paper understands authenticity within its own analysis as referring to the faithfulness of representations to the

experience and emotional reality of the real-life implications of memory loss. I analyse portrayals of memory loss narratives by the extent to which the characters, arcs, and technical aspects of filmmaking avoid portraying “inauthentic stock characters” that are “emotionally manipulative” at the cost of realism (Capstick et al., 2015, p. 12).

Through the paper, I perform a textual analysis of a collection of 21st-century films that portray characters with memory loss ailments, while contrasting them with one another as well as pre-21st-century films that engage with memory loss to gather data on the similarities, changes, and development of the contemporary films. The 20th-century titles referenced are a selection of notable films that help emphasize the development of memory loss cinema. These older titles are discussed and compared with 21st-century titles to provide essential context, identifying how portrayals of memory loss have evolved and become more articulate and authentic representations. In selecting the contemporary films, it was imperative to analyse 21st-century titles that conveyed current attitudes on memory loss, meaning they focus primarily on dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Also, to highlight the variety of memory loss narratives and their commonalities, it was important to analyse films of different genres and varying cinematic approaches towards their portrayals of memory loss.

Gianluca Fantoni (2015, p. 22) identifies an inherent subjectivity in the medium of cinema. He discusses the manner in which filmmakers present their films as emerging from the perspective of certain characters. How a narrative is constructed cinematically and through which character's subjectivity affects measuring the authenticity of a film, as if the perspective of the character living with memory loss is neglected or not depicted in a cinematic fashion, it can be reductive to the "fostering of empathy" (Morris, 2010, pp. 146-156) and lead to simplified portrayals. The subjective element in cinematic storytelling may inform how the narrative and the representation of individual characters are communicated to an audience. An inherently cinematic example that Membrez (2019, p. 2) identifies of the representation of the instability and unreliability of memory in cinema is found in *The Man Who Loved Women* (Truffaut, 1977). In the film, a man remembers a woman in a red dress; later, his recollection visually changes onscreen, and he instead recalls the woman as having worn a blue dress (Membrez, p. 2). The change of the dress's color occurring onscreen clearly highlights the manner in which cinema can represent the subjective and unreliable nature of human memory in a wholly unique manner as compared to other mediums. In relation to perception and subjectivity altering a narrative, Berg (2006, pp. 45-46) discusses the phenomenon of the "Subjective Plot": narratives that are akin to getting inside the head of a character and perceiving the narrative from their point of view.

My findings reinforce the conclusion that 21st-century cinema presents narratives that better reflect the reality of memory loss. Specifically, I conduct an exploration of the portrayal of memory loss in more fantastical mainstream genre films as compared to more true-to-life narratives, and the importance of the personal experiences of filmmakers with regard to creating authenticity in memory loss narratives. Also, knowledge on how the cinematic style of these films allows for a better reflection of the emotional reality of diseases like dementia is contributed. The uniqueness of this paper analysing elements of narrative, character development, and cinematic language, contributes findings and fills gaps in knowledge regarding the development of contemporary memory loss films, which are more layered and authentic than their 20th-century counterparts, while still potentially ushering in new stereotypes.

### Amnesia and Early Cinematic Portrayals of Memory Loss

Neurologist Sallie Baxendale (2004, p. 1480) notes that misrepresentations of the reality of amnesia are common in film narratives. Baxendale explores the sensationalism of many films centred on amnesia that feature representations that bear no relation to the reality of the affliction. She references films released as early as 1915 that took advantage of the comedic and dramatic potential of the idea of a character with amnesia. The formerly frequent trope of a narrative's progress arising from a character forgetting their identities and past, usually

through an accident involving a head injury, is a rare occurrence in real-life. Often action, thriller, or science fiction films have their protagonist inflicted with amnesia so as to set them on an action packed quest to recover their memories. *Memento* (Nolan, 2000), for example, has been cited as presenting a more accurate representation of amnesia than most films, but regardless, it falls prey to misrepresenting the reality of amnesia for the sake of a plot device that will maintain narrative momentum (Seamon, 2015, pp. 216-217). However, the narrative's presentation of amnesia is not romanticized in terms of how it represents those who are dealing with memory loss. Instead, the manner in which the narrative progresses conveys a sense of confusion that provides a more authentic representation of the reality of memory loss than past sensationalized portrayals of amnesia.

In the early to mid-20th century, when films featuring characters with memory loss were released, they did not involve plot points regarding memory loss diseases. The absence of these plot points was rooted in the fact that illnesses like Alzheimer's disease were not commonly diagnosed at that time, and as a result there was no demand for in-depth and accurate portrayals of memory loss in film narratives. Studies (Kawas & Corrada, 2006, pp. 411-419) show that the late-20th century saw a significant increase in the prevalence of memory loss disease in the general population, due to a steady increase in life expectancy.

Older films are far more likely to use memory loss solely as a plot device rather than exploring its real-life implications. For instance, the acclaimed film *Random Harvest* (LeRoy, 1942) features a lead character (Ronald Coleman) suffering from amnesia in the aftermath of the First World War. The film uses memory loss as a device to generate conflict within the central romantic plot of the story, rather than representing it in a meaningful way, obfuscating the harsh truths of memory loss diseases. *Anastasia* (Litvak, 1956) is one of the few widely released films from the 1950s that deals with memory loss, specifically amnesia. However, the film is primarily focused on constructing a romantic melodrama through its narrative rather than on presenting a realistic representation of amnesia. As with *Random Harvest*, the portrayal of Anastasia's (Ingrid Bergman) journey lacks a meaningful engagement with memory loss. Her amnesia instead serves as a superficial plot device rather than as a catalyst for a deeper exploration of memory loss. *Mirage* (Dmytryk, 1965) similarly revolves around a protagonist suffering from amnesia. However, unlike *Anastasia*, the film takes a more nuanced approach towards the representation of memory loss. Despite this sense of nuance, memory serves primarily as a trigger for events in *Mirage* and is comparable to *Memento*. Both films are of a similar genre and use memory loss as a propellant for the narrative journey of their characters. *Memento*, more so than *Mirage*, uses the memory loss conceit to develop its protagonist in a way that resonates with the themes of memory.

Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, the most common type of memory loss portrayed in film narratives was amnesia. While some films, such as *On Golden Pond* (Rydell, 1981) demonstrated a more multifaceted approach to this type of narrative, most depictions of memory loss were found in romantic and comedy films, such as *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Seidelman, 1985) and *Overboard* (Marshall, 1987). *On Golden Pond*'s plotline serves as a prototype for the narratives of later films like *Iris* (Eyre, 2001) and *The Father* (Zeller, 2021). In his analysis of *On Golden Pond*, Calvin A. Colarusso (2011, pp. 151-152) emphasizes how the film's empathetic and mature portrayal of the bittersweet yet optimistic perspective on the experience of losing memory marked a significant departure from earlier depictions and created a precedent for a more thoughtful approach for narratives that explore this topic.

### 21st Century Change: A Shift Away from Amnesia

In the early 21st century, narratives featuring memory loss began to change in terms of how people with memory loss were portrayed, likely due to increased public awareness of these conditions. This change can be seen when comparing two films: *The Majestic* (Darabont, 2001) and *Iris*. *The Majestic* was a commercial and critical flop (King, 2002). The reviews pointed to the old-fashioned and overly sentimental nature of the narrative as its core problem. In contrast, *Iris* deals with Alzheimer's disease openly and realistically, and was both commercially successful and highly acclaimed, receiving multiple award nominations. This shift away from

sentimentality towards more authentic narratives in memory loss films is a reflection of changing sensibilities in contemporary cinema.

Amnesia did for a time in the early 2000s continue to be a typical plot device in romantic films, but these films are outliers in the contemporary film landscape due to the focus shifting to representations of memory loss diseases. For example, *The Majestic*'s portrayal of amnesia is viewed as less faithful to the reality of the affliction than that of *Memento* (Seamon, 2015, pp. 168-169). Unlike *Memento*, *The Majestic*'s narrative lacks any commitment to conveying a realistic sense of what individuals afflicted with amnesia go through, evoking *Random Harvest* and *Anastasia*. In *The Majestic*, amnesia primarily acts as a superficial narrative causality that sets in motion a romantic, feel-good narrative reminiscent of Frank Capra's films (Seamon, p. 168). As Baxendale (2004, p. 1480) notes, films often trade accuracy in their representations of amnesia for inaccurate representations, which may produce a heightened sense of drama. The romanticism in *The Majestic* encapsulates an example of glamorising an individual's memory loss affliction.

Where filmmakers choose to either romanticize or trivialize depictions of memory loss, representations of the specific diseases involved tend to lose credibility. The same tension between romanticism and realism in portrayals of amnesia extends to portrayals of other

memory loss afflictions. Amnesia, which was once the predominant form of memory loss represented in cinema, has been replaced by two other forms of memory loss as the most widely depicted: Alzheimer's disease and dementia. This is evident from the fact that the majority of contemporary film releases centred on memory loss focus on these diseases.

### Authenticity in Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia Narratives

Cinematic narratives that progress due to the portrayal of Alzheimer's disease and dementia's influence are a point of contention among scholars. Psychologist Daniel Anderson (2010, p. 1289) highlights the importance of striking "the right balance between discussing a particular issue without diluting it" and the importance of not "sensationalizing it", while Seamon (2015, p. 219) believes that cinema raises social awareness of memory loss diseases but at the cost of authenticity in the representations of how these diseases affect people's lives. He (Seamon, p. 220) observes this may be because of a lack of personal experience and understanding on the part of the filmmakers who produce representations of memory loss. A desire on the part of filmmakers to present crowd-pleasing representations of Alzheimer's disease may lead to the creation of unrealistic developments in narratives and potentially create new stereotypes.

*Iris* focuses on the real-life story of novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch (Judi Dench), who succumbs to Alzheimer's disease. The film bluntly depicts Iris's situation and does not shy

away from representing the pain and hardship involved in an individual losing their memory and, by extension, their sense of self. However, during one of the last scenes, the narrative resolves on a surprisingly uplifting note, with her admittance to a high-end care facility. This moment contrasts with the dour mood and tone of the preceding scenes, suggesting that individuals living with memory loss struggle for a while but will be fine in the end. *Iris* does not acknowledge the inevitable struggles Iris will have with Alzheimer's disease in the future, as the film briefly depicts her having passed away, but not her final struggles with her disease. The final days of a person with Alzheimer's disease may be so painful that the choice is made to sanitize the representation of that experience in *Iris*. Such sanitization propels the narrative toward an ending that depicts Iris at peace in death, shielding the audience from the bleakest aspects of memory loss. Perhaps the conclusion of the film strikes "the right balance" (Anderson, 2010, p. 1289) in its portrayal, as *Iris* draws attention to many of the struggles of those living with memory loss. However, I propose that neglecting the harsh truth of Iris's final days to, as Capstick et al. (2015, pp. 20, 24-25) suggested, appease audiences robs the film of some of its authenticity.

The sanitization of memory loss representation is also seen in films with fantastical aspects to their plots that efface the harsh realities of the memory diseases they portray. For example, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (Wyatt, 2011), a big-budget science fiction film, features

a supporting character named Charles (John Lithgow), who is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Although Charles is not the central focus, throughout the film, the filmmaker portrays Charles struggling with the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, with all the tribulations, such as forgetting how to perform basic tasks. The realistic painting of the scenario, despite the spectacular aspects of the film, together with John Lithgow's authentically bemused and distraught performance as Charles, contribute to the believability of this portrayal of memory loss disease. In Charles's death scene, Lithgow's very subdued performance conveys the fear and sadness in Charles's eyes resulting from the loss of self he has experienced. Although these scenes reflect the reality of memory loss and are comparable to scenes in other straightforward drama films, *Rise of the Planet of the Ape's* narrative focuses primarily on a sensational science fiction scenario. Despite some medical academics criticising genre fare for misinforming the public on memory loss (Baxendale, 2004, p. 1483) , and unlike the seemingly less sensationalized *Iris*, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* ends its portrayal of Alzheimer's on a downbeat note that is notably more in line with the reality of the disease, as it focuses on Charles's death rather than ending his story at a point before his condition drastically deteriorates. I would argue, however, that *Rise of the Planet of the Apes's* shift to a more action-orientated finale – which is to be expected in a blockbuster film – offsets any lingering impression created by the authentic portrayal of Alzheimer's disease within the narrative.

Another fantastical film, *Robot & Frank* (Schreier, 2012), is an independent science fiction film which features dementia as the central focus of the narrative. Frank (Frank Langella) is a former thief struggling with the early stages of memory loss, who is looked after by a robot assistant (voiced by Peter Sarsgaard). On the surface, the narrative is light-hearted, which might lead viewers initially to believe that the narrative is something other than a challenging study of memory loss. In fact, behind its bright exterior, represented by its natural lighting and warm color grading, *Robot & Frank* subtly represents memory loss and captures the sadness and self-reflection that emerges when someone loses their memories. The ending presents Frank, a lone figure in the centre of a wide shot in a large retirement facility, with most of his memories gone, and only sporadically visited by his family. He is at this point almost totally non-verbal, with his ability to connect with the world around him coming to an end, with the cinematography and vast emptiness of the location suggesting the isolation brought about by his memory loss.

Outside of its more grounded story and setting, the perception that *Iris*'s portrayal of memory loss comes from a more authentic place than the portrayals found in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* or *Robot & Frank* arises from its origins in Murdoch's husband, John Bayley's (Jim Broadbent) memoir. The film's "based upon a true story" credit telegraphs its connection to reality. This outlook may be correct if Bayley's memoir is compared directly to *Robot & Frank* and *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, but in fact all three films arise from filmmakers interpreting

screenplay elements that are based in some form of reality. *Robot & Frank* and *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* are both set in science fiction worlds, but the filmmakers have clearly drawn on reality to create their representations of memory loss. Although scholars like Capstick et al. (2015, p. 12) decry cinema for inaccurately portraying illnesses for the sake of plot progression, comparing these films to their 20th-century counterparts demonstrates that contemporary memory loss narratives are more inspired by the reality of memory loss diseases and that filmmakers enable those realities to inspire the narrative causality of their work. Specifically, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*'s protagonist and Charles's son Will (James Franco) is a doctor who attempts to find a cure for Alzheimer's disease, reflecting the desire of real-life researchers, which puts the narrative in motion. *Iris* may have the closest connection to an actual individual who struggled with a memory loss disease, but all three narratives are empathetic.

Despite the fact that *Robot & Frank* and *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* are less rooted in realism, thus less prone to be seen as "authentic" to the portrayal of memory loss diseases than *Iris* by the metrics of other academics (Baxendale, 2004, p. 1483; Capstick et al., 2015, p. 12), the narrative focus on memory loss within the science fiction genre has its advantages. The choice to begin *Robot & Frank* with a comedic and fantastical tone helps to draw the audience into the film's darker themes as it becomes more sombre towards its climax. This tonal

development is a persuasive representation of the progression of memory loss diseases, as at first these diseases may present in the form of mistakes, which can be treated in a light-hearted manner before becoming more severe. The argument that such narratives may tend to sanitize the experience of having memory loss to a “problematic” degree (Capstick et al., p. 12) is relevant here, but the analysis of these films demonstrates that both realistic and fantastical films can represent the truth of memory loss. What is necessary for these narratives to be effective is an execution that reflects the lived-in experiences of individuals with diseases like Alzheimer’s or dementia.

### The New Archetypes and Arcs in Memory Loss Films

Although these contemporary narratives are largely articulate, stereotypes still abound in films featuring memory loss. These films risk the commonalities they share developing into hindering clichés. Commonalities across these narratives create new stereotypical elements in contemporary memory loss narratives and result in the characters who have memory loss experiencing similar narrative dilemmas. Although not all stereotypes are necessarily negative, Seamon (2015, p. 57) suggests that the presentation of certain social stereotypes taking liberties with reality “can lead to dangerous consequences”.

With contemporary narratives focusing more on characters with memory loss illnesses, the archetype of the caring loved one that must care for the person with memory loss has become

a staple of the narratives of films featuring memory loss (Seamon 2015, p. 201). These similar casts of supporting characters – concerned sons, daughters, partners – often reach similar destinations by the conclusions of the narratives. Iris’s husband, Charles’ son, Frank’s children, all serve the same function of becoming the focal point at some key moment in their film’s narratives. They become surrogates for the characters with memory loss when their conditions advance beyond the point where they can easily be identified with. For instance, in *Iris*, the film does not focus on Iris at the conclusion of her narrative, but rather on John. This shift tends to undermine the film’s explorations of mortality, a key tenet of memory loss narratives. Taking the subjectivity of the narrative away from Iris detaches the audience from the experience of memory loss and lessens the impact of its thematic exploration of mortality. Seamon (p. 186) notes a negative perception of ageing and the troubles – like memory loss – that come with it, particularly in the western world. These underlying prejudices in society could suggest that the urge for film narratives to shift away from their elderly protagonists’ perspectives is not because they are no longer identifiable with, but rather, there are characters audiences are more willing to identify with, such as the “worried loved ones”. Because of examples like *Iris*, the archetype of the “loved one” is at risk of becoming a reductive stereotype in these narratives that hinders depicting the experience of the character with the memory ailment.

Each narrative analysed depicting a memory loss disease strives in its depiction and examination of the transience and impermanence of life to either represent the individual with memory loss in a way that comforts or provokes. Gerontologist Ann Basting (2009, p. 40) states that memory loss narratives sometimes “climax in a moment when the two worlds – then and now – come together to reach some sort of harmony”. The narrative harmony identified and highlighted by Basting is more apparent in some films than others. *Iris* is a clear example of a comforting, harmonic narrative conclusion, in that it progresses towards an ending that makes it clear that people with memory loss are respected and cared for in their final days. Contrastingly, *The Father* and *Relic* (James, 2020) are provocative outliers due to their narrative’s unflinching portrayals of the terrifying reality experienced by individuals with memory loss diseases. *The Father* in particular is distinct from *Iris*, as it is told completely through Anthony’s (Anthony Hopkins), a man living with dementia, perspective. The commitment to keeping the narrative wholly within Anthony’s subjectivity avoids the film being caught up with the “worried loved one” stereotype, thus enabling fewer stock characters (Capstick et al., 2015, p. 12) and making a moment of harmony more difficult to pinpoint.

Undoubtedly, new stereotypical elements have formed in 21st-century memory loss narratives; however, it is apparent after having examined the older films featuring memory loss, that the narratives and characters in the contemporary films drawn on throughout this paper

present the reality of memory loss diseases more directly. The contemporary characters exemplify the richness of the increased authenticity of these portrayals. Rather than setting aside meaningful representations to focus on purely feel-good fare, more like the pre-21st-century portrayals, and contrary to Seamon's (2015, p.57) concerns, these films all wish to raise awareness for at least some of the truths of those living with memory loss diseases.

### Lived Experiences as Inspiration for Contemporary Memory Loss Narratives

The inspiration for the lived-in experiences of the films can come from the lives of the filmmakers themselves, enriching the authenticity of the narratives. Director and writer of *The Father* Florian Zeller divulged that the inspiration for the story came from his grandmother being diagnosed with Alzheimer's when he was 15 (Barlow, 2021). He describes the process of representing Anthony's experiences in the film as "cathartic" for not only himself, but for the audience. Zeller has experienced the narrative appealing to people who have a history with the disease and the humanity of those who empathize with Anthony despite their lack of knowledge of memory loss disease (Barlow).

Although it is not the same disease as Alzheimer's, co-director of *Still Alice* (Glatzer & Westmoreland, 2014) Richard Glatzer was diagnosed with ALS while writing the screenplay (Buckley, 2014). Experiencing the symptoms of a disease that slowly impairs a person and takes part of their identity away enabled Glatzer, in a similar manner to Zeller, to draw on his own

experience by relating his feelings of loss to the feelings Alice (Julianne Moore) experiences with her Alzheimer's disease. Glatzer's revelation highlights that although he and other artists tackle memory loss despite having no experience with it, they can delve into their personal experiences – in Glazer's case, ALS – of mortality while conveying the loss of self that those living with memory loss experience. The narrative's rootedness in personal experience helps audiences invest in the representation of characters who are experiencing memory loss. The personal inspirations of these filmmakers adhere to the authenticity of their experiences, influencing narrative causality in contemporary films, as they prioritize the thoughtful portrayal of characters living with memory loss and deep reflections on its themes over traditional mystery or romantic tropes.

Both Zeller and Glatzer show that filmmakers can draw on personal experience to produce realistic narratives, but there are also more abstract films that draw upon personal experiences. Natalie Erika James, the director of *Relic*, has spoken of how her film, a horror film which focuses on memory loss, drew inspiration from the first time her grandmother (represented by the character of Edna in the film, played by Robyn Nevin) forgot who James was due to the worsening of her dementia (Ewing, 2020). James's inspiration for her film demonstrates that real-life inspiration can assist in the creation of abstract and fantastical memory loss films. The exploration of the experience of memory loss in more abstract or fantastical narratives may be

construed as sanitising such experiences, but as already argued above, sanitization may also be an issue with regard to portrayals rooted in realism which may avoid representing all that the final days of a person living with memory loss entails. A key aspect of these narratives is their refusal to sanitize the authenticity of the emotions within the stories of people with memory loss.

### The Inventive Implementation of Cinematic Language to Portray Memory Loss

In an effort not to sanitize the experience of memory loss, Zeller's *The Father* is told wholly from the perspective of Anthony. The narrative places the audience right in the middle of Anthony's struggle with dementia. None of the emotions of confusion and anger he experiences are sanitized. There are no overtly sentimental moments offered that might comfort the viewers watching Anthony's struggles. The film purely depicts his reactions to his new perceptions of the world around him. The frank approach of *The Father* results in a portrayal of memory loss that is harrowing and authentic in its confrontation with the reality of an individual consumed by dementia. Narratologist Seymour Chatman (1978, pp. 158-161) notes cinema's unique ability to manipulate point of view within a narrative in a manner different to other media. The visual and aural attributes of cinema are used to evoke a sense of the perception of those living with memory loss (Membrez, 2019, pp.58-61). *The Father* proves this by conveying a point of view in a wholly unique manner in its endeavor to eliminate any

dilution (Anderson, 2010, p. 1289) from its narrative to maintain the authentic experience of Anthony's dementia. The severity of Anthony's disease profoundly impacts the progression of the narrative and the implementation of the film's cinematic language (Grobar, 2021). His inability to retain memories throughout the film aligns with aspects of the Subjective Plot (Berg, 2006, pp. 45-46). By moving away from the conventions of "classical narrative logic" (Berg, p. 47) and instead following a structure which is more akin to dream logic, the film effectively reflects the fragmentation of Anthony's mind and memory, reinforcing its subjective narrative approach and commitment to portraying the experience of dementia.

Marilyn Fabe (2004, pp. 168-169) notes the importance of the identity of a given character who is recalling their memories. Their identities inform the subjective nature of their recollections, meaning that distortions of memory, and thus of narrative, are possibly dependent on who is presented as recalling said memories (Fabe, 2004, pp. 168-169). The cinematic language of editing may help to convey the perceptions and mental processes of characters who process their memories in the grips of an ordeal with a memory loss disease. *The Father* is presented completely from the perspective of a person with memory loss facilitates an opportunity for the editing to directly reflect the mindset and perceptions of the character.

Firstly, on a basic level, when Anthony is calm, the editing remains linear, but when he becomes confused, the editing reflects this by breaking continuity and using harsher, more frequent cuts. On another level, the deliberate use of continuity breaks in the editing serve to recreate or reflect the sense of confusion within Anthony that stems from his memory loss. For example, scenes repeat themselves in front of Anthony's eyes. Sometimes a current scene will unfold in the same way as a scene which has already been presented. However, aspects of such repeated scenes, such as the cast and location, will change from one iteration to the next. In one example the woman he believes to be his daughter is played by two different actors (Olivia Colman and Olivia Williams) in distinct versions of the same scene, and the location in which the conversation between them takes place changes from the kitchen to the dinner table. The editing retains the same rhythm across these scenes, reflecting what Anthony experiences and, more broadly, the subjectivity of individuals with Alzheimer's (Grobar, 2021). *The Father's* editing techniques, which replicate Anthony's perceptions, never become transparent and fully graspable; they operate in the realm of abstraction, staying truthful to his subjective experience.

*Relic* conveys abstractions through its cinematic techniques to realize an atmosphere that suggests the emotionally troubling aspects of dementia. The mise-en-scène and atmosphere of the film draw on the aesthetics of the horror genre, but in the service of creating the fear an

individual and their families would feel in the wake of a memory illness diagnosis. The visual tone of the film is extremely dark, and the design of Edna's house is decadent, replicating her interior state. The replication of Edna's decaying mind through set design evokes a visual metaphor suggesting that ignoring the loss of self that comes with memory loss is impossible. The climax involves Edna grotesquely removing skin from her face, revealing a disfigured form underneath. Edna's family are initially terrified but ultimately overcome their fears and embrace Edna, helping to remove the rest of her skin, completely revealing Edna's grotesque form. These sequences create intensity through a combination of camera movement, an aesthetic marked by a sense of unease and harsh sound design to project an extremely visual and aural expression of Edna's struggle and the necessity of facing up to the unpleasant reality of these illnesses. The film discussed in this paper with the most comparable tone to that of *Relic* is *The Father*. Although it is not a horror film, *The Father* so strongly represents a person living with dementia's perspective through the disruptive aspects of its technical approach that an uneasy feeling is associated with Anthony's struggles explored throughout the film. Both films indicate that representations of memory loss may be more impactful and even authentic when presented in unique, provocative ways through cinematic techniques that are true to the emotional reality of dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Conversely, seemingly straightforward techniques can demonstrate a subtlety that contrasts with the approach of *Relic* while still cinematically representing the subjective experience and “interior vision” (Fabe, 2004, p. 153) of the character living with the memory loss disease. In *Robot & Frank*, some shots are handheld and shaky, which imbue certain scenes with a sense of disorientation and confusion, reflecting Frank’s state of mind. The shallow depth of focus *Still Alice* implements in certain scenes adds a visual touch of isolation to Alice’s experience. *Iris* cuts back and forth between the present, where Iris is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, and her time as a young college student (Kate Winslet). These flashbacks feature a young, happy, and exuberant Iris – a stark contrast to the woman suffering from memory loss that she becomes towards the end of her life. The juxtaposition of Iris’s past and present created by the editing highlights the decline brought about in individuals by diseases like Alzheimer’s. *Iris* opens with a young Iris and John (Hugh Bonneville) intimately swimming together beneath the surface of a lake. A seamless cut from the young Iris and John swimming to the older Iris and John doing the same activity is created by a continuity of location. It is a simple yet poignant editorial choice, as it deepens the perception of Iris and John as the same people as the younger versions of themselves. It also relates to “then and now” structure in narratives representing memory deterioration, depicting a character as having once been young and healthy and now being old and affected by memory loss (Casado-Gual 2015, p. 393). Seeing

John and Iris being both young and old, doing the same activity, in the same location, with the same tenderness for each other, summarizes the loss of self Iris experiences, visually humanising her before her ultimate decline. These traditional technical aspects illustrate that subtle techniques can function effectively in terms of creating representations of memory loss. *The Father's* use of radical strategies to represent memory loss may be more innovative, but that does not mean more traditional cinematographic approaches cannot be effective in cinematically portraying memory loss.

Furthering the idea of the interior vision of a character, art historian Caterina Albano (2016, p. 95) states that cinema can use sound and imagery in unison to externalize internal processes of memory. To that effect, sounds trigger not only emotions within individuals but may also release memories from those individuals with memory loss (Seamon, 2015, p. 74). *Relic's* sound design is crucial in creating its sense of dread. The film achieves this atmosphere not only through the deployment of chilling sound effects, but also through the use of silence. *Iris* through its sound design consistently disrupts the fading memories of Iris's idealized past with the sounds of her gruelling reality. Iris's moments reminiscing through the use of flashbacks that are soon to be lost memories of her past are regularly interrupted by sounds of the present that snap her back to reality. The interruptions underline the power of sound with regard to the process of recollection for a character. Sounds of the present typically play over

the flashback images of the past onscreen before these scenes fully transition back to Iris's current reality. Although a sentimental score plays throughout *Iris*, there are a few instances of silence where the shot is still and solely focused on Iris. Silence and stillness create moments of reflection and rumination on memory loss. Due to the absence of sound, the focus is solely on the image of an expressionless woman ravaged by her disease, with the silence acting as a representation of her lost memories and invites contemplation on the cruel nature of memory loss. The unison of silence and profound yet simple imagery depicts living with memory loss in a matter-of-fact fashion, without any of the sensationalism referred to by Capstick et al. (2015), Sallie Baxendale (2004), and Daniel Anderson (2010), that would diminish the authenticity of the portrayal.

## Conclusion

As has been established, simplistic amnesia-driven storylines, as seen in films like *The Majestic*, are no longer the predominant narrative type found within memory loss films. These have been replaced by storylines which, like *The Father*, strive for an authenticity in their depictions of Alzheimer's disease and dementia. Even the genre films of interest here create portrayals of memory loss that reflect the reality of individuals living with these diseases. This attempt of authenticity through contemporary film often comes from filmmakers wanting to reflect the reality of their own experiences, which results in a relatability, as most audiences

will have at least a tangential connection to a degenerative disease like dementia. Still, as mentioned throughout this paper, although there is greater dedication to authenticity in contemporary films in comparison to their 20th-century counterparts, some films still try to avoid representing harsh realities to make their portrayals of memory loss more palpable. If this trend begins to shift back towards overly sentimental and sensationalist portrayals, films centred on the experience of memory loss could yet again become predominantly inaccurate and sensitized. Studying audience reception to films focused on memory loss to further gauge public reaction to memory loss portrayals will be an area of interest for future research.

The analysis and findings presented in this paper showcase the importance of the contribution of the stylistic and technical aspects of filmmaking in creating representations of the experience of individual characters' memory loss. Editing, aesthetics, mise-en-scène, and sound are used to convey the filmmaker's interpretation of memory loss, informing the subjective experience of the character diagnosed with memory loss, which is crucial in creating authenticity. The evolution of memory films towards the aesthetic approaches of *The Father* or *Relic* will lead to more harrowing and effective pieces of art that capture the emotions associated with the transience of life. There is a risk that films may become too aesthetically radical for a mainstream audience, alienating them from experiencing stories of memory loss. However, it is still essential to innovate how these types of narratives are told and continue creative

developments in authentically portraying the memory loss experience. Future research would benefit from maintaining a focus on the development of cinematic language, jointly with the audience's response, to better understand the ramifications of specific approaches to these portrayals.

Contemporary films centred on memory loss have evolved from simple genre stories utilising amnesia as a plot device, to dramatic films which attempt to reflect the real struggles of those with Alzheimer's disease and dementia. It will be important for future research to continue to analyse the authenticity of memory loss films and deduce if they contain common archetypes, like the "worried loved one", and narratives with no distinctive narrative elements present in the arcs of the characters. Such a development would trivialize the representation of memory loss and represent a step back from the articulate portrayals which currently mark contemporary cinema.

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