The Inescapable Archive: Cinematic Representations of the "Computer Ecosystem"

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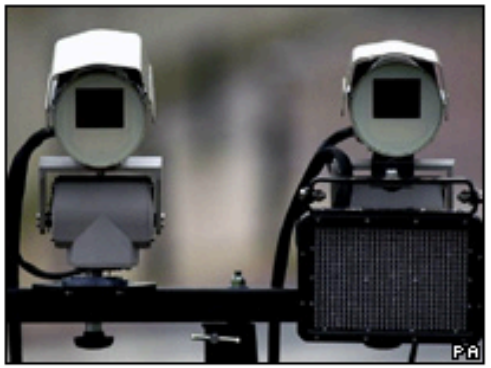
Britain is 'surveillance society'

Fears that the UK would "sleep-walk into a surveillance society" have become a reality, the government's information commissioner has said.



There are up to 4.2m CCTV cameras in Britain

Richard Thomas, who said he raised concerns two years ago, spoke after research found people's actions were increasingly being monitored.

Researchers highlight "dataveillance", the use of credit card, mobile phone and loyalty card information, and CCTV.

Monitoring of work rates, travel and telecommunications is also rising.

There are up to 4.2m CCTV cameras in Britain - about one for every 14 people.

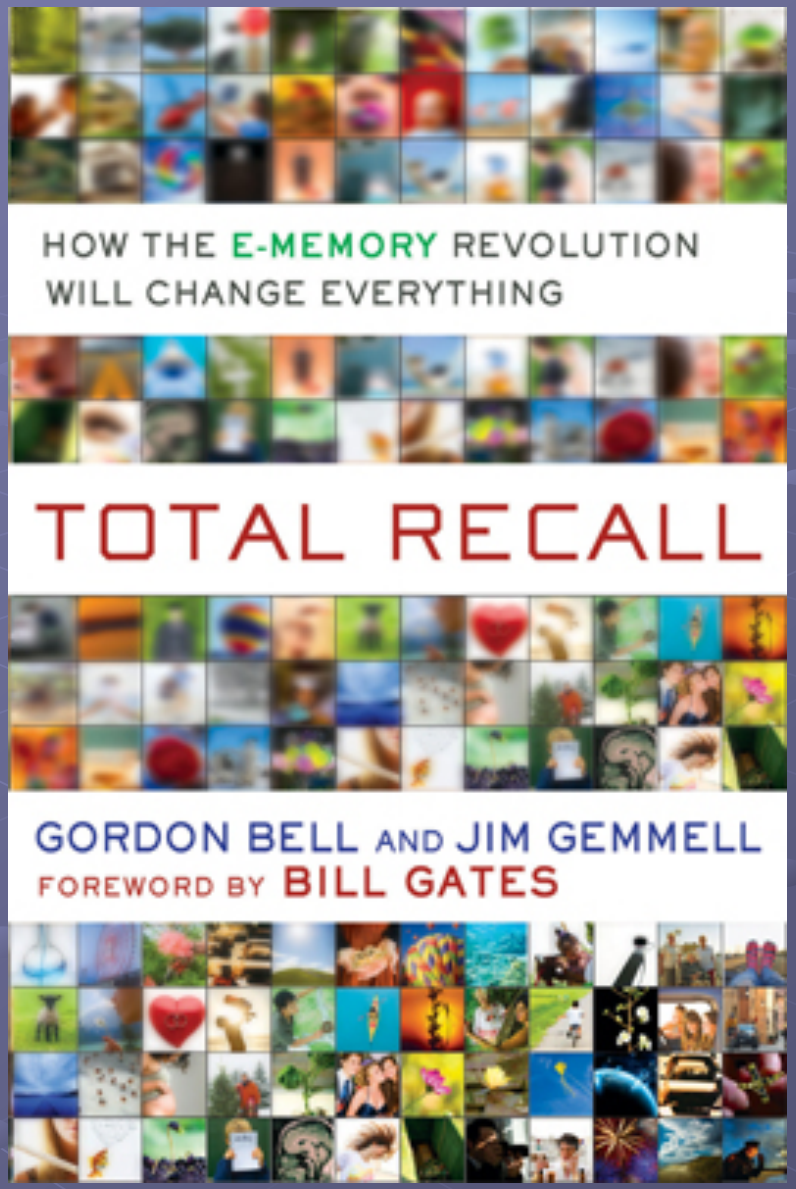
Surveillance society - full report

"There are 4.2m CCTV cameras in Britain – about one for every 14 people"

Richard Thomas, Surveillance Studies Network

"That's why I propose a social democracy of fear. We will have to have active interventionist states protecting us against things that frighten people "

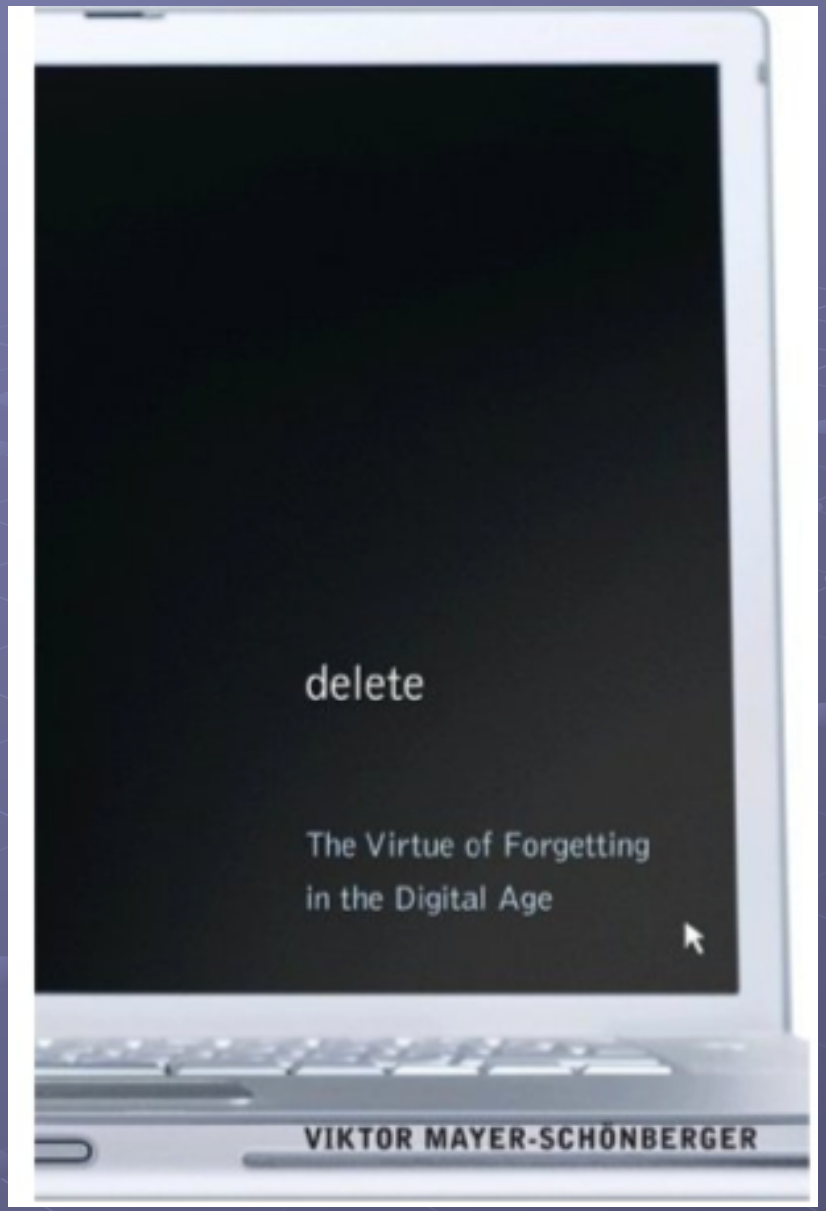
Tony Judt



" . . . the ability to relive one's own life story in Proustian detail, the freedom to memorize less and think creatively more, and even a measure of earthly immortality by being cyberized—these are all potentially transformational psychological phenomena."

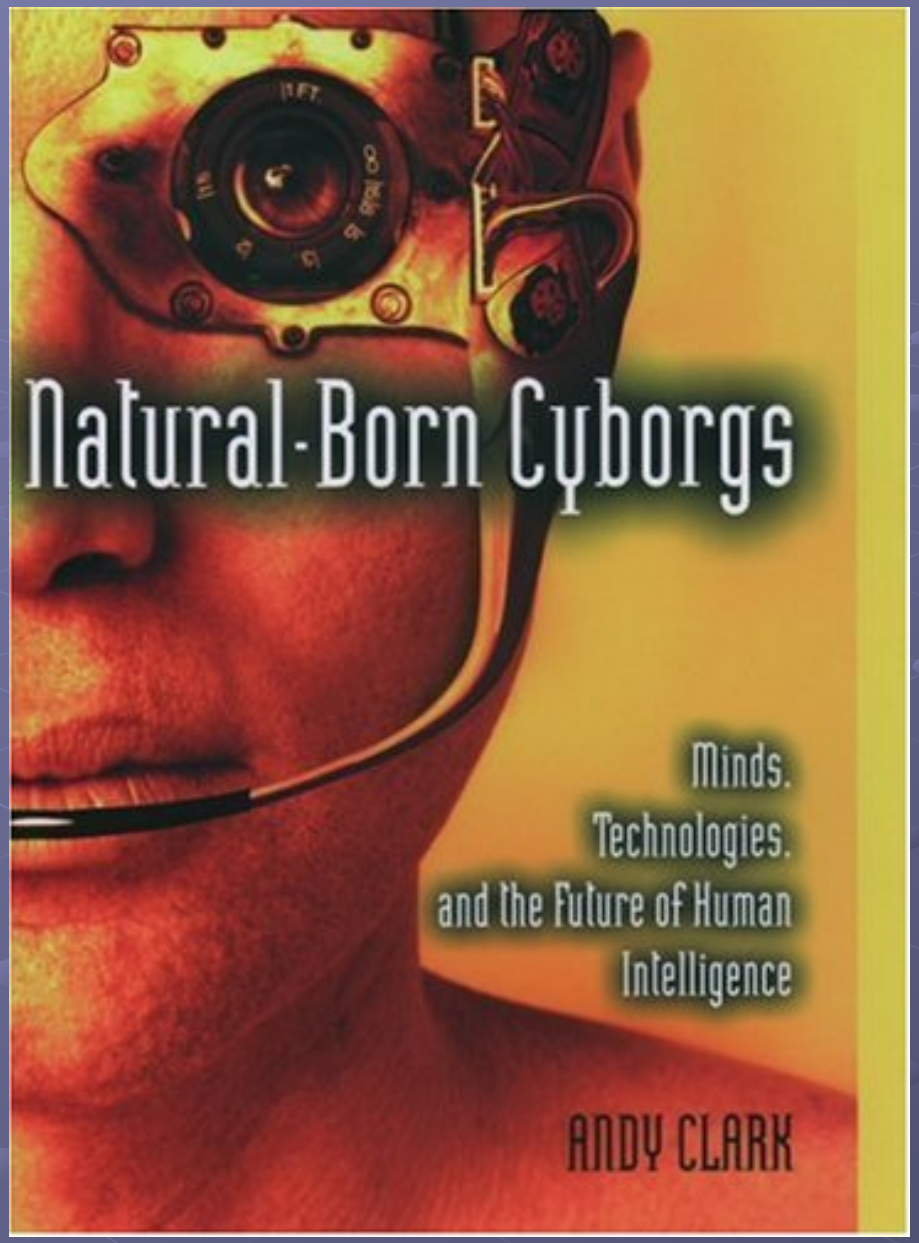
"You, not your desktop's hard drive, are the hub of your digital belongings"

Gordon Bell and Jim Gemmell



"Forgetting is not just an individual behavior. We also forget as a society. Often such social forgetting gives individuals who have failed a second chance . . . Through these and many similar mechanisms of social forgetting, of erasing external memories, our society accepts that human beings evolve over time . . ."

Victor Mayer-Shönberger



"The line between biological self and technological world was, in fact, never very firm. Plasticity and multiplicity are our true constants, and new technologies merely dramatize our oldest puzzles . . ."

Andy Clark

Why Cinema?

(1) Film is a medium that has always depended upon and advanced the borders of recording technology.

(2) Film is a medium that is simultaneously representing and being transformed by the unbounded archive.

CASINO ROYALE
COMING SOON

QUANTUM OF SOLACE
OCTOBER 31

EWAN McGREGOR
PIERCE BROSNAN
KIM CATTRALL
OLIVIA WILLIAMS
THERE IS NO GOOD WAR
WANTED
LIAR!
A FILM BY ROMAN POLANSKI
THE GHOST WRITER
"MASTERFUL ★★★★."

Casino Royale

Or, “Next time, I’ll shoot the camera first . . .”

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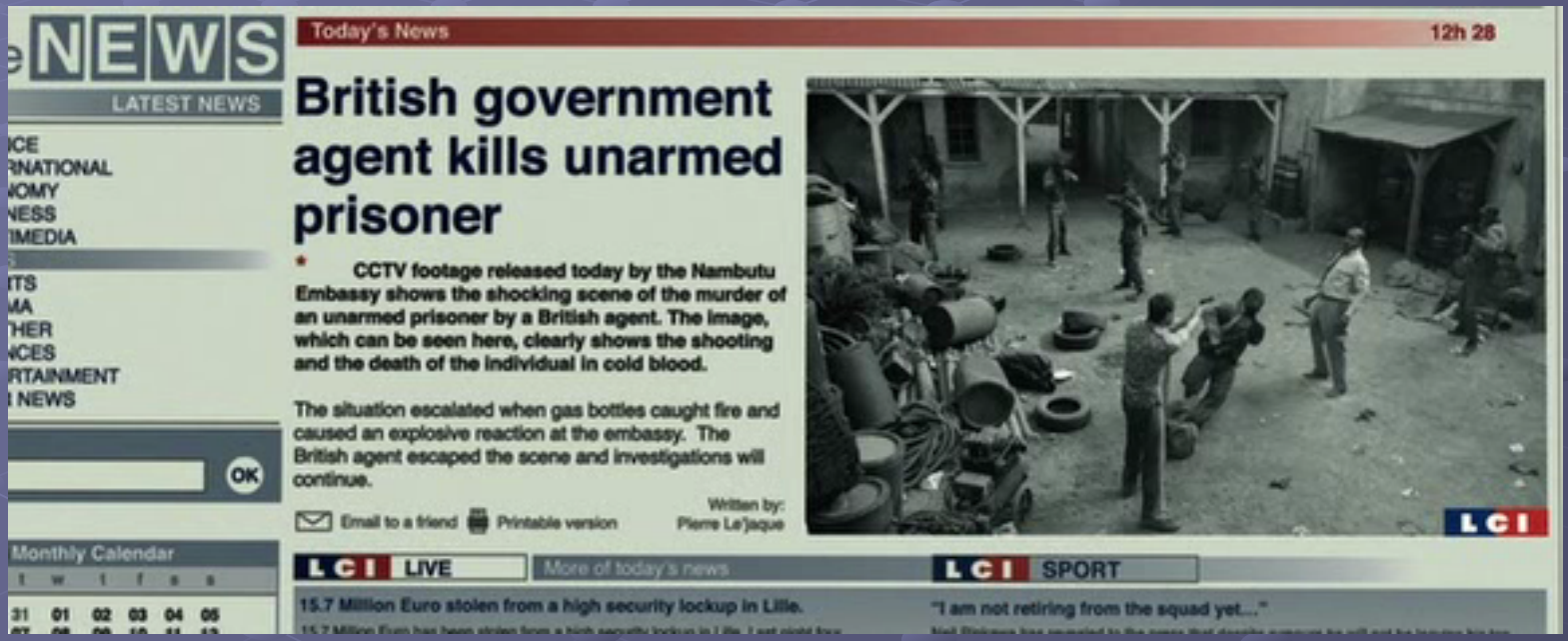
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British government agent kills unarmed prisoner
CCTV footage released today by the Nambutu Embassy shows the shocking scene of the murder of an unarmed prisoner by a British agent. The image, which can be seen here, clearly shows the shooting and the death of the individual in cold blood.
The situation escalated when gas bottles caught fire and caused an explosive reaction at the embassy. The British agent escaped the scene and investigations will continue.
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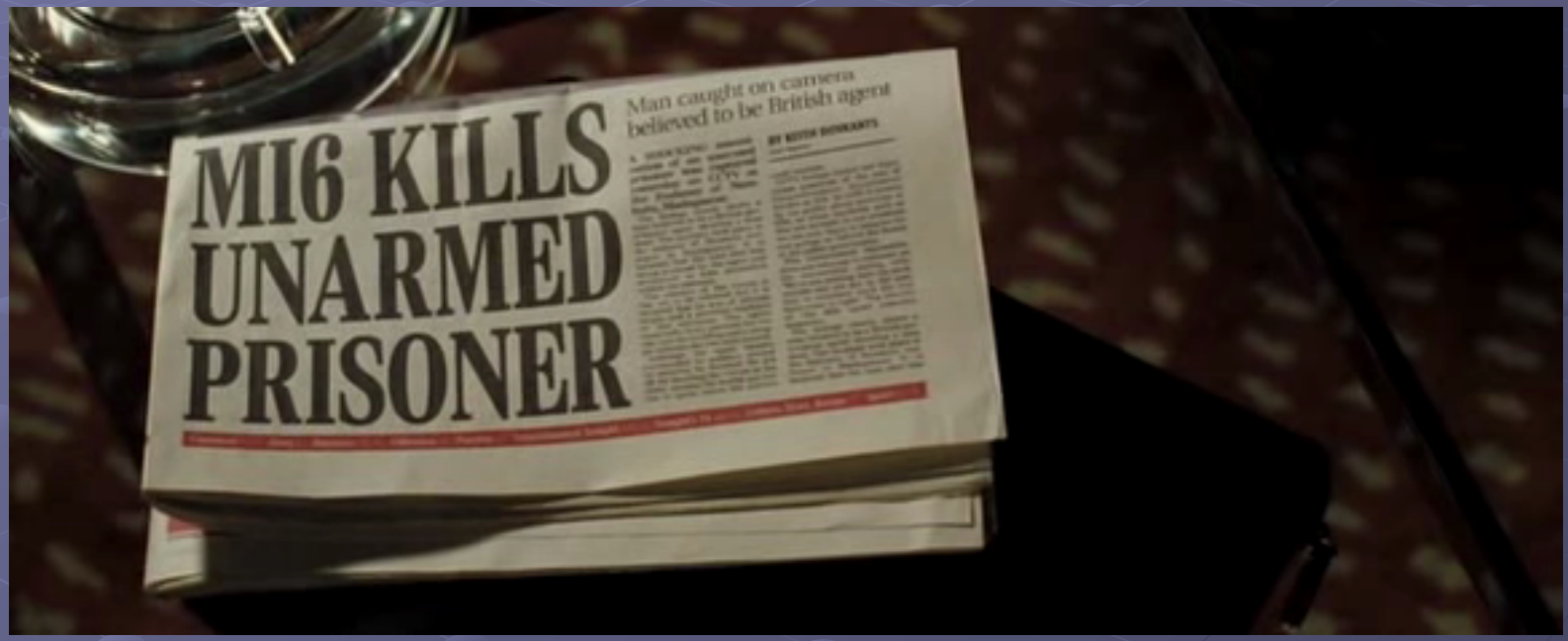
"I am not retiring from the squad yet..."


MI6 KILLS
UNARMED
PRISONER
Man caught on camera
believed to be British agent

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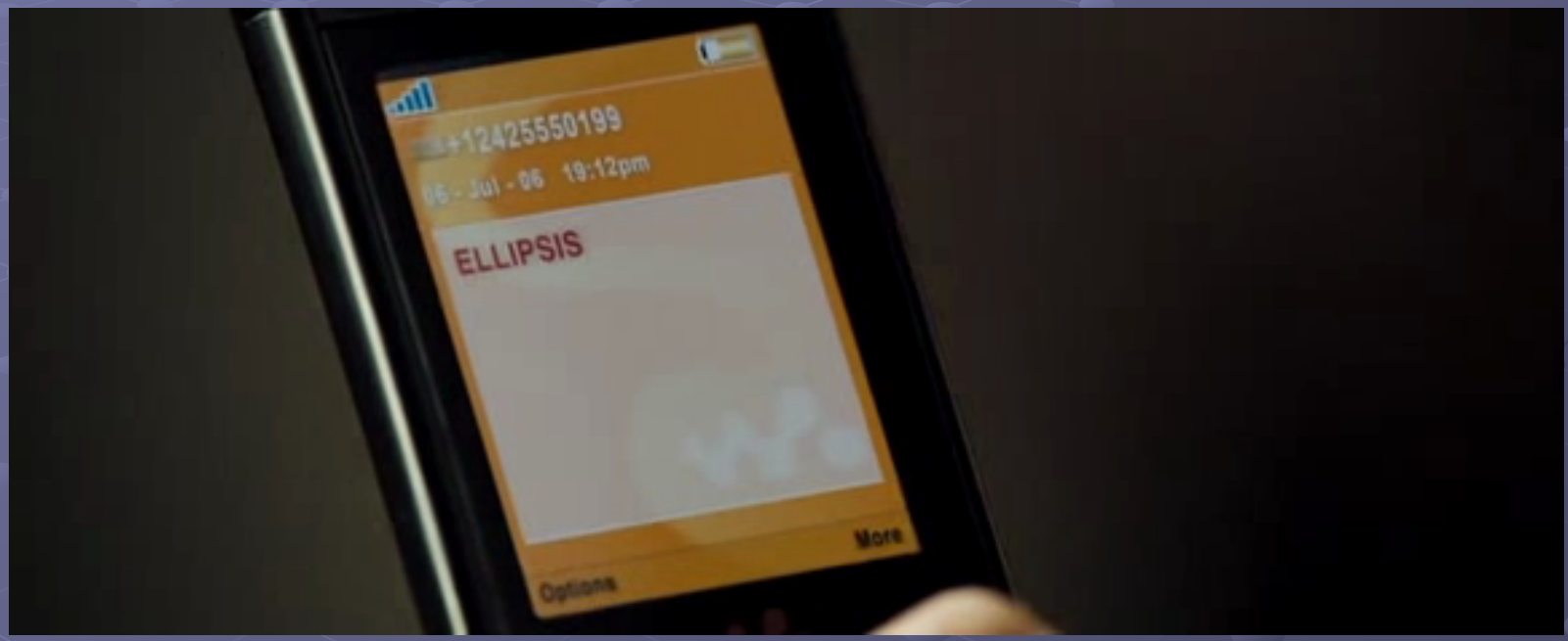
THE OCEAN CLUB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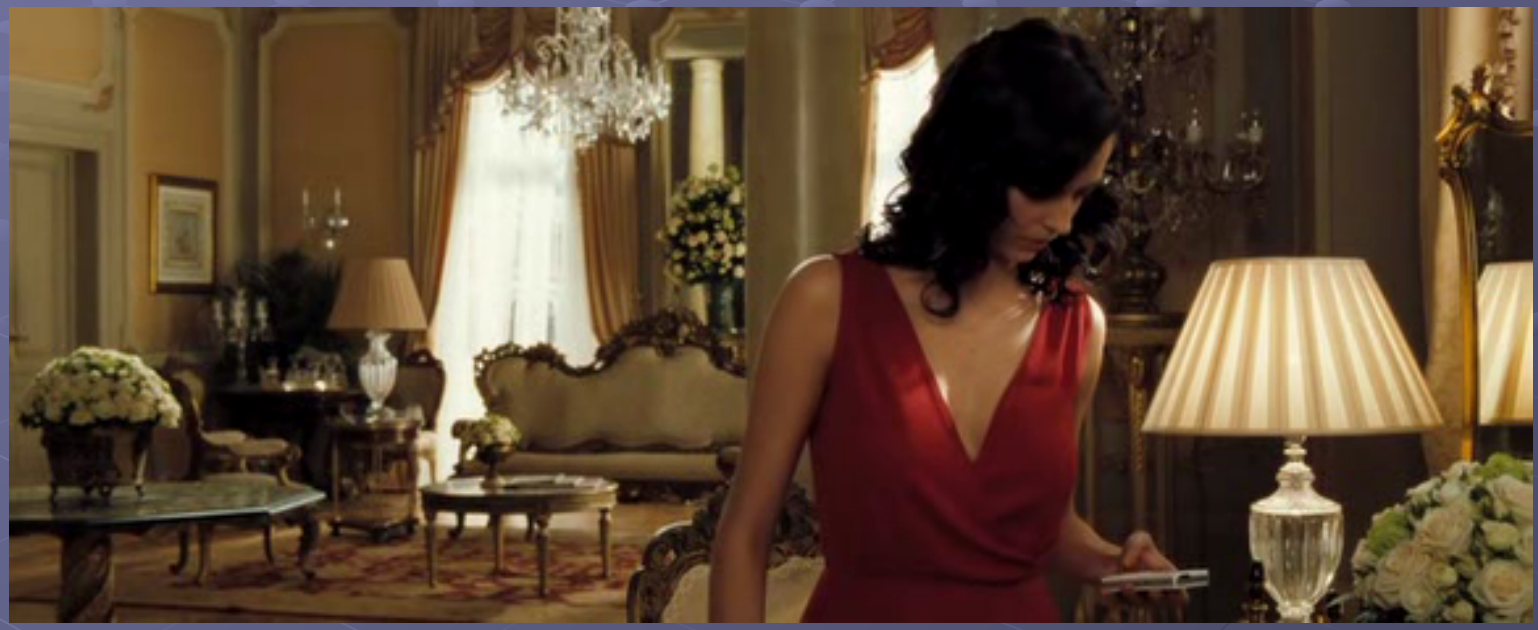

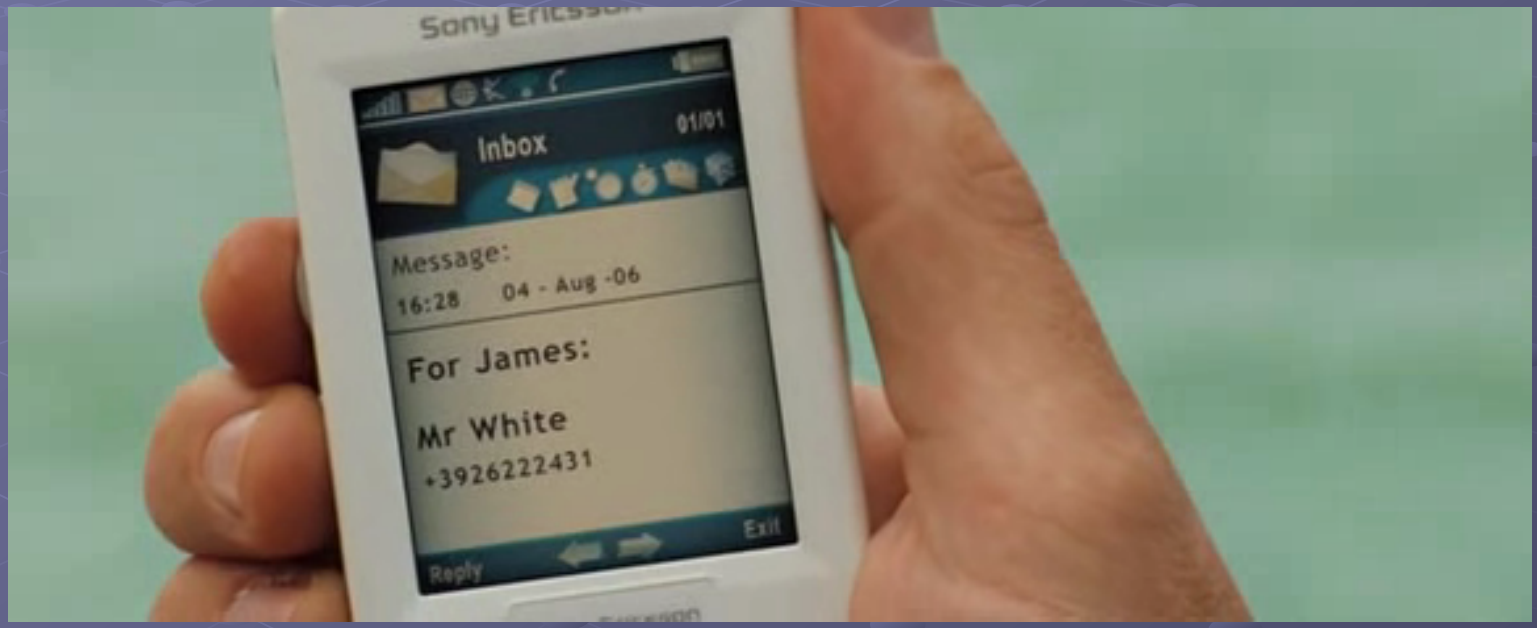
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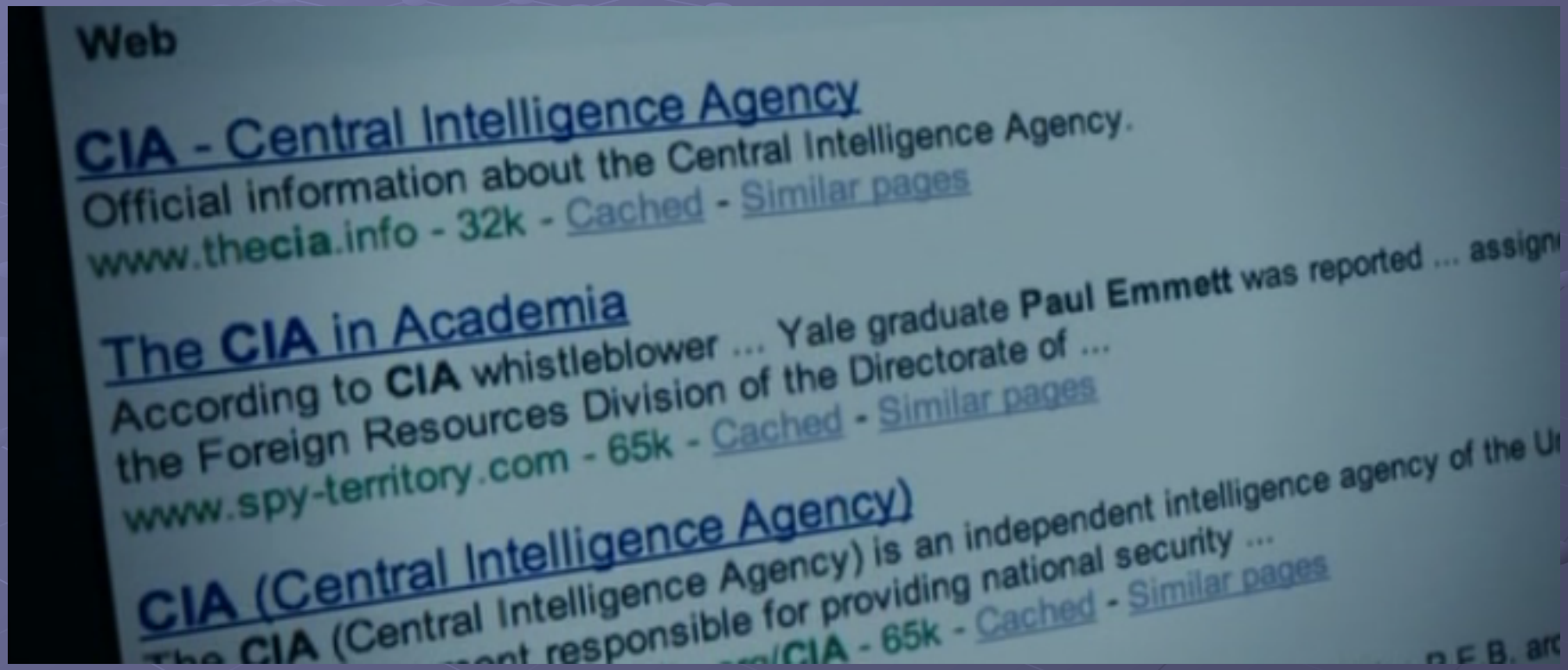
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"This brings us to the more general problem of preservation in the sphere of the mind . . . Since we overcame the error of supposing that the forgetting we are familiar with signified a destruction of the memory-trace--that is, its annihilation--we have been inclined to take the opposite view, that in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish . . ."

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

"Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past--an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one . . . And the observer would perhaps only have to change the direction of his glance or his position in order to call up the one view or the other."

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

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Abstract – The Inescapable Archive: Cinematic Representations of the "Computer Ecosystem"

Archives (even digital ones) are conventionally thought of as storage facilities that need to be accessed or entered using the correct protocols; as containers of a knowledge that is not available without traversing some kind of boundary. As Jacques Derrida put it in 1995, there is no archive "*without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.*"[1] This talk is part of a project which explores some of the ways in which this concept of stored knowledge has been overturned through the omnipresence of digital recording technology (especially cameras) and of networked media devices (cell phones, computers, etc.). In brief, what I am arguing is that (in many contexts) there is less and less space "outside" the archive. Specialized information often does not have to be sought out in dedicated archival environments; it is accessible from anywhere and needs only to be summoned. We no longer go to it; it comes to us, and our digital traces make us ridiculously easy to find and display, as we shall see.

This transformation has liberated archival material in many ways, but the users of archives (i.e. all of us) do not always or even often share this sense of liberation. It is not necessarily our choice that controls our contact with an archive or not – in the digital world, it surrounds us wherever we happen to be. We are recorded to knowledge all the

[1] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics*, 25.2 (Summer, 1995), 9-63: 14.

time whether we like it or not, and the logic of the database means that this is omnivorous, not purposive like traditional archival recording [SLIDES]. As Matt Leblanc (who played Joey on *Friends*) said to *Entertainment Weekly* way back in 2002:

> I woke up in the morning and I heard helicopters hovering right over my house. When the helicopter is hovering right over the house, you don't go outside because you're surefire on the news live.

There have been many responses to this phenomenon: at one end of the spectrum, it is seen as a benign inevitability of advancing technology by which individuals could digitally recording every aspect of their daily lives (e.g. Microsoft Research's MyLifeBits project)[SLIDE]. Properly done, they argue, we could all live in a "personal computer ecosystem"[2] in which an invisible super memory would follow us wherever we go via networked digital devices. Such a memory would be massively present in its potential effects, but its immensity would be discreetly hidden in the immaterial digital cloud. At the other end of the spectrum, other theorists see this refusal to forget as one of the great incipient traumas of the digital age [SLIDE] (e.g. Victor Mayer-Schönberger's *Delete: The Virtues of Forgetting in the Digital Age* et al). In philosophy and neuroscience, it has taken the form of a vigorous debate about the limits of the human mind: can external technological aids be properly considered to be part of what is called "the extended mind,"[SLIDE] or should that term be reserved for the physical operations of our brains.[3]

I hope to show the futility of both the utopian and the Jeremiad responses to this phenomenon that I sketched out above. Using feature film representations of the

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[2] Gordon Bell and Jim Gemmell, *Total Recall: How the E-Memory Revolution Will Change Everything* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 10.

[3] See Richard Menary, ed., *Extended Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010) for a balanced summary of this debate.

unbounded archive, this paper analyzes how instant access to digitally-stored knowledge affects lived human experience. I have chosen cinema as my data set because [SLIDE](1) it is a medium that has always depended upon and advanced the borders of recording technology and [SLIDE 2] (2) it is a medium that is itself being transformed by the very phenomenon that I am studying here, as the multiplatform omnipresence of films (legally acquired and otherwise) in the sea of digital entertainment is rewriting the future of feature films. My cases in point will be [SLIDE] Martin Campbell's *Casino Royale* (2006), Marc Foster's *Quantum of Solace* (2008), and Roman Polanski's *The Ghost Writer* (2010). These films show digitally-transmitted knowledge influencing and conditioning people and events, sometimes before the characters consciously know it and always in a way that seems entirely consonant with everyday life. The data cloud around us functions like an archive governed by a new set of protocols that we all have to learn to manage. What is new about digital access to data is our loss of choice in the matter [SLIDE]. We are not safely outside the archives we use any more, and circumstances often oblige us to use them. Which wouldn't necessarily be a problem except that knowing is the post-digital world depends upon being networked and thus upon being known, that is, being recorded in someone else's archive at the same time. Control over this new archive comes not from asserting ourselves (that's actually a very dangerous thing to do), but by accepting our status as a medium for information rather than a master of it.

Casino Royale; or, "Next time, I'll shoot the camera first"

All narrative advancement in *Casino Royale* is effected through cell phones, computers, and cameras, but especially cell phones. Almost everything that James Bond learns about

where to go next and whom to kill next comes from information he gleans from them. In a very real sense, phones are not the medium of communication between people in this film – people are the medium of communication between the data stored on cell phones. At three crucial plot junctures, they also the means to speak with the dead – there are no interrogations in *Casino Royale* (except for the refreshingly old-school torture scene near the climax) because everything you might want to know about anybody is contained on their cell phone, so you just kill the owner and use his or her digital traces (obtained via the phone) to see exactly where they have been and to whom they have been talking.

We begin in the post-credit action sequence, where a suspected terrorist bomb builder is checking his messages [SLIDE] while watching a fight between a mongoose and a cobra in Madagascar and being watched by James Bond and another British agent. The bomber is alerted when he sees Bond's colleague poking at his hidden ear-piece [SLIDE] – that is, the technology that is supposed to keep you concealed is precisely what gives you away. Several minutes of mayhem later, James follows the bomber in to the embassy of a fictitious African country [SLIDE] and is recorded by the security camera [SLIDE]. He kills the bomber, but gets his cell phone and sees the very same message that the bomber received earlier in the film: Ellipsis [SLIDE]. Tellingly, the camera angle is set up to make it impossible to distinguish between James's hand and the bomber's [SLIDE].

This information gathering has two effects: James is made an object of knowledge for the international media through the surveillance film [SLIDE] and his angry boss exclaims that their politician masters "don't care what we do, they care what we get photographed doing". He is henceforth part of the mediascape, known as a spy [SLIDE]

(later in the film, he refuses to use the alias MI5 has provided on the grounds that the villain will know who he is anyway, so why bother?). He also uses the dead bomber's phone to follow the his contact trail to the Bahamas and the next link in the chain – a small-time operative whom James kills [SLIDE] and whose cell phone [SLIDE] leads to the next villain (who is planning on blowing up the prototype of a new airliner). When he loses the villain in a crowd, he finds him by calling him on the newly-captured phone and watching to see who in the crowd picks up [SLIDE]. When he is chasing the villain through Miami airport and needs to get through a security-coded door, he uses the cell phone's number which (of course) is the code. The villain's cell phone is the detonator for the bomb he wants to set off [SLIDE].

Skipping to the film's climax, it is Vesper Lind's cell phone that recalls her to her real masters among James's opponents [SLIDE] and a cell phone call from M that alerts Bond to what is going on [SLIDE]. We know we are getting to the climax when James needs two cell phones [SLIDE], one from his soon to be dead lover which leads him to the future and one that is in contact with London which is feeding him the now superfluous historical information that explains what is happening. Once again, the human subject is the medium between two phones, not the other way around. It is a cell phone call that confirms the identity [SLIDE] and location of the master villain [SLIDE] and, in the film's iconic last shot, James hold's both a cell phone and an assault rifle – the phone is probably the deadlier of the two.

Summing this up, we see that digital technology enables a great deal of access to hidden data with minimal human agency – most of what James learns he does so by tracing the direction of calls, not by actually talking to people. The information is all out

there in the datasphere because even international master criminals leave a digital trace when they use their phones; all you have to know is where to look and what you need finds you. The catch is that you have to be seen to see and to be known in order to know; James growth into his role as a 00 agent in the film is crucially about his recognition of this fact.

I very much want to respect the 15 minute rule, so I will offer some tantalizing glimpses of two more film examples as evidence that this phenomenon really is as widespread as I am claiming here – feel free to ask for more in the question period. The only interesting scene in the next James Bond film *Quantum of Solace* takes place on the floating opera stage in Bregenz, Austria. In it, James finds the hidden super villains in the opera's audience by hiding behind the stage [SLIDE] and effectively turning the audience into the performers [SLIDE]. When he interrupts their supposedly top-secret conversation, they all get up to leave thereby, of course, revealing themselves to James and his cell phone camera [SLIDE] which simultaneously transmits the data to London [SLIDE] where an analyst instantaneously adds the identity of the people in the photographs through MI5's computer databases [SLIDE]. Once again, the means of concealment becomes the means of revelation; we are known in the process of knowing; and the truth is always already out there. Roman Polanski's *Ghost Writer* works the same way, as the protagonist finds the crucial link in the chain of revelations by following the preprogrammed satellite navigation instructions in his dead predecessor's car [SLIDE] and finding out the identity of a secret CIA operative whom none of the highly placed, well-resourced smart people in the film have found by . . . searching for him on Google [SLIDE]. In a traditional spy thriller, the top secret data is behind the walls of the Chinese

embassy or on a microfilm. Now, it's on Google.

To conclude, how do we conceptualize this externalized archive and the anxieties to which it gives rise? The best model for it that I have found is the description of human memory that Freud sets up in *Civilization and its Discontents*:

> This brings us to the more general problem of preservation in the sphere of the mind . . . Since we overcame the error of supposing that the forgetting we are familiar with signified a destruction of the memory-trace--that is, its annihilation--we have been inclined to take the opposite view, that in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish . . .

Like archives, human memories face preservation problems and like the post-digital archives I have been describing here, we can never really escape the contents of our minds (however much we may wish to). Freud goes on to create a wonderfully vivid image for this inescapability using the city of Rome:

> Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past--an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one . . . And the observer would perhaps only have to change the direction of his glance or his position in order to call up the one view or the other.

All of the protagonists in the films we have looked at are in this position of the observer in this imaginary eternal city – they don't have to unearth anything in order to find what is hidden, they just have to look in the right direction and it is all

in plain view. For Freud, this is a figure for the human memory's incredible retentiveness – while we may only have conscious access to a small portion of what we have recorded to memory, the rest is all there and perfectly capable of disrupting our lives through neurotic or psychotic symptoms. With the benefit of modern neuroscientific knowledge about memory, we can add that all the mind needs is a prompt or a cue in order to produce what we had forgotten we knew; and that this recollection will be a fiction woven out of a few salient pieces of fact mixed with our current desires and unconscious responses. We may object that the archives that have been so wonderfully analyzed in this conference are not the same things as cell phone data or closed-circuit camera images, but it we succeed in making archives as open, as multi-valent, and as public as we would like, can this distinction hold? I would say not; it is a difference of degree, not of kind

It is not a coincidence that this access to memorial knowledge is simultaneously free and threatening (in Freud and in modern cinema). We are used to a feeling of conscious control over our decisions about what we wish to know and what knows us. Post-digital culture has reversed the polarity of these decisions, and we are all going to have to adjust to never being outside because the outside is shrinking. The archive is not a place to which we go; it is where we all live.

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Archives (even digital ones) are conventionally thought of as storage facilities that need to be accessed or entered using the correct protocols; they are containers of a knowledge that is not available without traversing some kind of boundary. As Jacques Derrida put it in 1995, there is no archive "*without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside*."[1] This talk is part of a project exploring some of the ways in which this conventional logic has been overturned through the omnipresence of digital recording technology (especially cameras) and of networked media devices (cell phones, computers, etc.). More and more, specialized information does not have to be sought out in dedicated archival environments; it is accessible from anywhere and needs only to be sought. In turn, our digital traces are recorded everywhere. This transformation has liberated archival material in many ways, but the supposedly-empowered users do not always share this sense of liberation.

There have been many responses to this phenomenon: some see it a benign inevitability of advancing technology and encourage individuals to participate by digitally recording every aspect of their daily lives (e.g. Microsoft Research's MyLifeBits project). Properly done, they argue, we could all live in a "personal computer

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[1] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics*, 25.2 (Summer, 1995), 9-63: 14.

ecosystem"[2] in which an invisible memory follows us wherever we go, massively present in its effects but with its immensity discreetly hidden in the digital ether. Others see this refusal to forget as one of the great incipient traumas of the digital age (e.g. Victor Mayer-Schönberger's *Delete: The Virtues of Forgetting in the Digital Age* et al). In philosophy and neuroscience, it has contributed to the vigorous debate about whether external technological aids can be considered to be properly part of the human mind, or whether that term should be reserved for the physical operations of our brains.[3]

This paper uses cinematic representations of this omnipresent archive to analyze how instant access to digitally-stored knowledge affects lived human experience. Using mainstream films such as Martin Campbell's *Casino Royale* (2006), Marc Foster's *Quantum of Solace* (2008), Roman Polanski's *The Ghost Writer* (2010), and others, this paper shows how the futility of both the utopian and Jeremiad responses to this phenomenon. The cloud of data that surrounds us does not affect us by mere chance, but is governed by a new set of archive protocols that users (that is to say, all of us) have to learn in order to manage. What is new about digital access to data is that we have lost the choice about whether to use it or not. Rather than lying passively in vaults waiting to be activated, these films show digitally-stored knowledge influencing and conditioning people and events, often before the characters consciously know that it is happening. Control comes not from asserting ourselves, but by adapting to the ways of information technology.

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[2] Gordon Bell and Jim Gemmell, *Total Recall: How the E-Memory Revolution Will Change Everything* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 10.
[3] See Richard Menary, ed., *Extended Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010) for a balanced summary of this debate.