

Erik Lynch

Kelly Pierce

ENG 124

6 November 2021

### Recollections of “Total Recall”

Philip K. Dick first published the short story, “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale,” in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in April of 1966.<sup>1</sup> Set in Chicago in the indefinite near-future, the story follows Douglas Quaid, a middling government clerk wracked with ennui who dreams of travelling to Mars, a far off and exotic locale only seen by scientists and high-ranking government officials. After visiting the Rekall Corporation to have false memories of a pulse-racing life as an interplanetary secret agent implanted in his mind, trouble arises as, once injected with a truth serum, Quaid begins recalling genuine memories of being a government assassin on Mars. Quaid is riddled with ontological doubt, as he simultaneously believes that both his mundane life as a clerk and his life as an assassin are true. Quaid’s wife has finally had too much of his Martian dreams and leaves him. He is confronted by two policemen, disarming one before fleeing. Shortly afterwards, however, the government agency contacts Quaid through a telepathic implant in his mind, persuading him to turn himself in on the condition that Rekall will supply him with a new set of false memories, one that will satisfy his longing for adventure and allow him to return to his mundane life as an average working stiff. The end of the story, however, is ambiguous, as the new memories of Quaid making peaceful first contact with a race of mice-sized aliens are revealed to, perhaps, be more than just fantasy.

---

<sup>1</sup> Goodreads, “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale,” <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6561374-we-can-remember-it-for-you-wholesale> Hereafter WCRFYW.

The Dutch director Paul Verhoeven adapted Philip K. Dick's *WCRFYW* for the silver screen in 1990, as "Total Recall."<sup>2</sup> Starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as Douglas Quaid, the film makes several meaningful changes to the plot from the short story and numerous minor changes. The relationship between Mars and Terra (Earth) differs in the film as, rather than being a nearly uninhabited rock seen only by scientists and government bigwigs, Mars sports a sizable working-class population concentrated in dense, domed cities, a population embroiled in a large-scale guerilla campaign against the exploitative Martian government. The characterization of Quaid's wife also differs between the source and adaptation. In the short story his wife is named Kirsten and is a blunt realist, a long-suffering spouse who has dealt with Quaid's spacey fantasies for years and has finally had enough. Lori, Quaid's wife in TR1, begins the film as a much more affectionate and fawning spouse, one who is sympathetic and concerned about Quaid's dreams rather than being annoyed by his fantasies and, instead of quietly leaving him, she is revealed to be a double agent who seeks to kill Quaid for the remainder of the film. There are several more minor changes in the early portion of the film, such as introducing a war between northern and southern blocs that is driving the high demand for turbinium, changing Quaid's job from being a government clerk to a construction worker, introducing the character of Richter, and altering the physical description of the Recall employees. Furthermore, the mechanics of the Recall process are changed, with truth serum being replaced by a schizoid embolism as the trigger for Quaid's recall – before the Ego Trip program had been implanted – and packets of chemicals being replaced by computer programs.

The characterization of Quaid also changes between the short story and the film. In the short story, Quaid wants to be a normal person and seeks to return to normalcy, whereas in the

---

<sup>2</sup> IMDB, "Total Recall (1990)," <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100802/> Hereafter TR1.

film Quaid believes that he is a normal person but, upon finding out that he is really a former agent of Mars Intelligence named Hauser with his whole bank of memories implanted by the Agency six weeks prior, he displays no desire to go back to being regular old Douglas Quaid. Quaid is also significantly more violent in TR1. Instead of nonlethally disarming a pair of cops and fleeing, killing no one, Quaid in TR1 recalls his secret agent skills by massacring his work friend Harry and his goons when they accost him in a train station.

The greatest point of departure between *WCRFYW* and TR1, however, begins when Quaid actually goes to Mars. Once there, Quaid uncovers a trail of clues left by his former self, maintaining tension, suspense, and mystery as he employs his detective skills to piece together his old contacts and old life, leading him, via the cab driver Benny, to his old flame, Melina, in Venusville, Mars' red-light district. After serious, meaningful tension with Melina, they resolve their issues and work together to oppose the villainous governor Cohaagen's dastardly schemes. The rebel leader Kuato is revealed to be a freakish goblin implanted in a rebel's stomach, who allows Quaid to recall his memories of a vast subterranean machine, the key to bringing down Cohaagen. Shortly, Kuato and the rebels are massacred, leaving only Quaid and Melina to resist Cohaagen's plans. It is revealed that the grand machines in Quaid's memory are not, in fact, devices to extract turbinium, but huge engines to melt Mars' ice core to produce oxygen, creating a breathable atmosphere and undercutting Cohaagen's profits as an air salesman. In turn, Lori is slain, as is Richter, then Cohaagen, all in tense and dramatically weighty scenes, with Quaid working his way up the chain of command. The film ends with Quaid and Melina regarding the new, free, livable Mars, together.

Twenty-two years later, the American director Len Wiseman undertook a remake of *Total Recall*, starring Colin Farrell as Douglas Quaid.<sup>3</sup> There is very little of TR1 in TR2, and nothing but Quaid's name from *WCRFYW*. To regard this film as an adaption of *WCRFYW* is a stretch. TR2 is an adaptation of TR1 to a new, blander era of filmmaking, but more than anything TR2 feels like a Jason Bourne movie crammed into *Total Recall's* IP. The 2012 movie suffers greatly for this. TR2 expends much effort in world building before the story commences, detailing how global chemical warfare decimated the world in the late 21<sup>st</sup> century, reducing the states of the world to only the United Federation of Britain and The Colony, formerly Australia. *WCRFYW* takes place in Chicago, minorly in New York City; TR1 begins in an unspecified future city in the northern bloc, assumedly the US based on accents, then on Mars; while TR2 is set in England and Australia, connected by a huge tunnel through the Earth's core called The Fall.

TR2's Quaid begins the film, albeit in a dream sequence, as a badass action star, a quality he shortly regains in his waking hours. Quaid is never really shown to be a regular guy, nor does he display a desire to be a regular guy. Quaid's job is altered again, from a government clerk to a construction worker to a worker at a cop robot factory in Australia. Lori is also given a job, as a soldier or first responder. Kuato, the mysterious and powerful leader of the Martian resistance, is replaced by Matthias, an indistinct old white man operating between England and Australia. Much more is initially known about Matthias than Kuato, including the publicization of Hauser as Matthias' right-hand man on the news. Additionally, Coahaagen is changed from the governor of Mars to the chancellor of the UFB.

---

<sup>3</sup> IMDB, "Total Recall (2012)," <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1386703/> Hereafter TR2.

There are some very minor commonalities between TR1 and TR2. Quaid/Hauser keeps his name, as do Lori, Coahaagen, and Harry, while Richter, portrayed by the talented Michael Ironside in TR1, is written out of TR2. Like TR1, Quaid sees the advertisement for Rekall on train and sees a lady with three breasts but, in TR2, this is in an Australian red-light district, not Venusville on Mars. The Rekall facility is also reimagined as a creepy pseudo-Orientalist opium den, in which the Rekall doctor pulls a cartoonish gun on Quaid once he begins to remember his suppressed past, and the doctor is immediately perforated by the cops. Quaid proceeds by laying waste to a group of faceless SWAT goons, rather than his best friend, making for a far less impactful scene. This whole movie is less impactful in a lot of ways. The cinematography is technically complex, and the set design is grandiose, but the color palette is so unforgivably ugly, it has none of the spirit and wonder of TR1. The movie looks as if Len Wiseman dropped his frames in the mud and forgot to wipe them off before loading them in the projector.

Continuing with the theme of TR2 robbing itself of any dramatic tension, Lori immediately tries to choke Quaid out upon suspecting that he might realize something is afoot, having made no effort at continuing the charade, after which Lori becomes British and spills all the beans without prompting. Once again, and certainly not for the last time, a thought entered my mind – *This is a significantly worse movie than TR1*. The synth cops take the trope of faceless goons and absolutely run with it to the edge of absurdity, being little more than meaningless butter for Quaid to effortlessly slice through. TR2 removes much of what made TR1 so good. TR2 removes all the interesting espionage and detective work of TR1. Replacing Quaid himself with some random British guy makes the video message much less meaningful, impactful, or interesting. Even when Quaid himself delivers a prerecorded video message later on, it lacks the dramatic effect of its equivalent in TR1. All tension between characters is

deflated immensely. Lori countermands Coahaagen's orders not to kill Quaid seemingly on a whim, with no circumstances supporting the decision. Much of the film is like this, with characters just doing things because it would look or sound more badass, not because it flows logically out of the structure of the story and of characterization.

Of all the characters butchered in TR2, none is done a greater disservice than Melina. In TR2, Melina randomly comes up to Quaid in a hovercar, with there being no tension whatsoever in recruiting her to his cause. In fact, Melina has been actively looking for Quaid, giving a polar opposite characterization compared to TR1. Between TR1 and TR2, Quaid was recast from Arnold Schwarzenegger, an immigrant actor from a non-anglophone country to Colin Farrell who, while technically an immigrant himself, is a native anglophone and passes as a stock-standard bankable WASP film star.<sup>4</sup> This same process, that of de-diversification, is even more egregious in the case of Melina. Melina was portrayed by Rachel Ticotin, a Russo-Jewish and Latina actress in TR1 but was recast as a white woman, played by Jessica Biel, in TR2.<sup>5</sup> There were genuinely times in TR2 where it was not immediately clear whether I was looking at Lori or Melina.

At this point in the film, TR2 debarks so radically from TR1 and *WCRFYW* that further analysis is impossible and all that can be had is a summary of a bad film. I fail to understand why this movie insisted on billing itself as a *Total Recall* film when it had absolutely no intention of being one. This film could have been a passable, if not memorable, early 2010s action flic if it had simply given itself a new title and renamed the main character. Even with only those

---

<sup>4</sup> IMDB, "Total Recall Cast 1990," <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100802/fullcredits>. Arnold Schwarzenegger as Quaid. Arnold Schwarzenegger is an Austrian immigrant; IMDB, "Total Recall Cast 2012," <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1386703/fullcredits>. Colin Farrell as Douglas Quaid.

<sup>5</sup> IMDB, "Total Recall Cast 1990," <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100802/fullcredits>. Rachel Ticotin as Melina; IMDB "Total Recall Cast 2012," <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1386703/fullcredits>. Jessica Biel as Melina.

changes, the film is such a poor adaption of either source that charges of plagiarism would not stick. Much of my further critiques are reiterations of those already stated, or just further examples for similar critiques. Coahaagen's plot to conquer The Colony with his army of synthetic soldiers rings hollow. Why would he risk a military invasion of a place that he already has total economic domination over? It makes no sense. So much of this film is utter nonsense and, while I do not believe that fantasy movies should be subordinated to our regular patterns of logic, they still ought to tell interesting and compelling stories, which TR2 does not.

Over the forty-six years between Philip K. Dick's initial publication of *We Can Remember It for You Wholesale* and the 2012 adaptation *Total Recall*, every aspect of the initial story was radically altered. Sometimes these changes were positive, primarily those made in the 1990 Verhoeven adaptation, in which the changes from the source material contributed to a fuller, more gripping film experience. The purpose of these changes, and the positive effect of them, was seemingly forgotten by 2012, in which Wiseman's adaptation changed everything compelling about the film and left little recognizable in its place. There is no joy, no humor, and no wonder in *Total Recall* (2012) which, moreso than any of its other numerous faults, makes it a detestable work of science fiction.