

Article

What Is Left After Memory: Love, the Body, and the Unconscious in *Little Fish*

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Abstract

Chad Hartigan's science fiction romantic drama *Little Fish* was released in 2020, soon after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the disease plaguing communities in *Little Fish* is not affecting people's bodies but their minds—those who have contracted Neuroinflammatory Affliction (NIA) are losing their memories. The story centres upon the experiences of one young couple as they anxiously witness the disease take hold of their community, loved ones, and eventually one another. The film explores relationships between memory and identity, and poses questions about the ways these processes interact with those of love and loss. Who are we once we begin to lose memories of our histories and ourselves? Who do we then become to our loved ones, with whom we have shared these memories and selves? What binds us together? The paper examines the film using concepts from memory studies, in particular psychoanalysis and philosophy, to argue that after conscious memory is gone, aspects of memory and identity remain through the body, the unconscious, and love.

Keywords: memory; identity; love; narrative; forgetting

1. Introduction

Scenes of Chad Hartigan's science fiction romantic drama *Little Fish*, released during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 (Hartigan 2020), are reminiscent of life during that early COVID-19 period—alarming reports about the spread of a mysterious disease, hordes of people jostling for medical supplies, conspiracy theorists declaring government culpability. However, the disease plaguing communities in *Little Fish* is not affecting people's bodies but their minds. Those who have contracted Neuroinflammatory Affliction, or 'NIA', are losing their memories. NIA affects both young and old and is escalating into a global crisis. People are going missing, captains of boats are getting lost at sea, and pilots are forgetting how to fly planes mid-flight. The story centres upon the experiences of a young couple as they anxiously witness the disease take hold of their community, their loved ones, and eventually one another. It is seen and heard through the eyes and voice of Emma, a headstrong and outspoken veterinary technician from northern England, who meets and falls quickly in love with Jude, an American photographer who has been living in Seattle to 'dry out' after his fast-paced twenties. Their courtship is sweet, rapid, and significant; they soon move in together, and become engaged. In many ways *Little Fish* resembles a typical indie romance, and is often twee—sentimental montages are common devices, as are earnest voice overs, and the swells of synthesisers and strings in scenes designed to induce swooning or grief. However, the film also makes use of its dystopian material to explore the relationships between memory, narrative, and identity, and poses questions



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about the ways these processes interact with those of love and loss. Who are we once we begin to lose memories of our histories and ourselves? Who do we then become to our loved ones, with whom we have shared these memories and selves? Is love based on the accumulation of cognisant memories and experiences with another person, or is there something innately felt or present beyond these conscious processes?

This article takes an interdisciplinary approach characteristic of the field of memory studies, drawing particularly on frameworks and scholars from psychoanalysis and philosophy. It begins with a discussion of the film's depiction of loss, grief, and decay, then explores notions of loss of memory as a loss of identity, and individual memory and identity as socially constituted. It then considers these constructs in more detail—specifically, memory and identity not only in terms of conscious recollection and self-awareness. It takes the view that memory 'is not a thing; it is a process; it is a movement' (Bergson 2004, p. 108, as cited in Perri 2014, p. 844), paying particular attention to embodied and unconscious processes underlying memory, identity, and subjectivity. The article argues that despite the erosion of conscious recollections and awareness, memory and the self exist and continue through the body, the unconscious, and love.

2. The Inevitability of Loss

Experiences of loss and grief are central to *Little Fish*. Within the first act, Emma and Jude discover to their despair that Jude has contracted NIA. They fearfully draw parallels with their friends Ben and Samantha—Ben has developed a severe case of NIA, leading to the violent disintegration of his relationship with Sam. Meanwhile Emma's mother, Jody, has been showing signs of memory loss during their phone calls. Eventually it is confirmed she has NIA when Emma receives a call from a man attempting to identify Jody, and so Emma must juggle the competing losses of her partner and her mother. By the end of the film, she too contracts the disease. The story is also punctuated by scenes of Emma working at a dog shelter, where she has the woeful task of euthanising dogs. Each day she updates the descending numbers written on the front of their cages, watching as they dwindle down to their zero day. She reflects to Jude, 'I'm not even a vet anymore, just an executioner.' The dogs represent the spread of the pandemic. Throughout the film, more and more of them line the walls of the shelter, signalling the growing numbers of people losing grasp of their daily lives. They also represent the inevitability of loss and death; towards the end the cages empty out.

In psychoanalytic theory, fear of death is commonly viewed as the primary anxiety faced by an individual. Klein (1946) argued that the first and foundational anxiety experienced by an infant is fear of annihilation—stemming from the death instinct, a fear that through its own internal destructive forces, the child will destroy its fragile self ('I hold that the Death anxiety arises from the operation of the Death Instinct within the organism, is felt as fear of annihilation (death), and takes the form of fear of persecution', p. 167). Winnicott (1960) asserted this fear stemmed rather from *external* threats. 'Death anxiety' or 'annihilation anxiety' plays out in various ways throughout one's life—through a literal fear of oneself or others dying, or more symbolically through fear of the decay of objects, the ending of relationships, and difficulties with finiteness or letting go.

In *Little Fish*, the characters' interactions with the dogs reveal in part their negotiations with death anxiety. For Emma, death must literally be faced head on. But she also struggles against it, telling Jude she wishes they could take in just one of these poor creatures. Jude is more accepting of the inevitability of loss. He tells Emma that one dog will become 17, and that they cannot save all of them (he also reminds her they already have one pet dog, 'Blue'). These responses are paralleled in their initial reactions to Jude's NIA. When Jude is accepted into a trial treating NIA sufferers with experimental brain surgery, he decides

against it. He would rather slowly lose his memories than risk an external intervention, accepting the gradual decay of things. Emma, however, wants to fight and voraciously reads studies on memory, desperately trying to find a way to hold on.

Their grief is made more complex by their context. Firstly, they must negotiate loss amid a pandemic. Emma asks, ‘When your disaster is everyone’s disaster, how do you grieve?’; ‘It feels wrong to make this just about us. It’s bigger than that. . .’. Not only is she grappling with her own losses, but the guilt of being preoccupied with personal grief during a global catastrophe. Commentary of the coronavirus pandemic referred to ‘disenfranchised grief’—when grief cannot be openly acknowledged or socially supported by an individual’s community (Albuquerque et al. 2021). In their survey examining the ways North American adults managed the loss of a loved one during the pandemic, Scheinfeld et al. (2021) reported that ‘some participants indicated their grief was minimized due to the global nature of the pandemic and because “the world is grieving”’ (p. 2833). Emma and Jude’s grief might also be understood in terms of anticipatory loss—the emotional response to loss before it occurs—and ambiguous loss—‘not as concrete or identifiable as traditional losses such as death’ (Betz and Thorngren 2006, p. 359). Although both are still alive, they are surrounded by decay, and a great deal of the film centres on their anxieties and uncertainties regarding the prospect of losing one another.

3. Memory, Identity, and Love

Though *Little Fish* foregrounds the loss of the couple’s relationship as the primary source of grief, loss of memory and identity run beneath as deeper deaths. Writers and scholars in memory studies have written extensively on the complex and inseparable ties between memory, narrative, and identity (King 2000; Brison 1999). The stories we tell define us; they reveal what we have experienced, what matters to us, who and what we love, fear and desire. Linda Grant writes that ‘Memory, I have come to understand, is everything, it’s life itself’; ‘Who are any of us without a history?’ (Grant 1998, p. 17). In *Little Fish*, memory and identity often feel interchangeable. Those with NIA are repeatedly referred to as ‘fading’, as though their senses or essences of self are dissolving with each lost memory. Emma observes ‘my Mum’s starting to fade.’ When Emma and Jude are called to the house of Ben and Sam following a violent outburst from NIA-stricken and confused Ben, Sam says to Emma, ‘He’s been forgetting pieces of himself for the last six months. Tonight he just forgot me.’ For those with NIA, loss of memories seems in part to entail a loss of self.

Memory and identity are also by nature relational; the individual and the collective are inextricably linked. Emma and Jude’s memories are often framed as one and the same. As Jude’s NIA progresses, Emma reflects that ‘his losses were mine too’. Halbwachs (1992) argues individual memory only exists through collective memory—that we can only articulate and make sense of our pasts and ourselves with the language and understandings of our collective culture. The concept of ‘composure’, developed by Graham Dawson, Alistair Thomson and others from the Popular Memory Group, proposes the memories we form as individuals are constructed through social processes (‘popular memory as the cultural significance of the past in the present—produced through the interaction of the particular, “private” memories of individuals and social groups and the generalized “public” memories. . .’ (Dawson 1994, p. 3)). Dawson, who coined the term composure, suggests we compose narratives in accordance with available social scripts to give ourselves psychological equilibrium or inner composure. Memory as socially constituted is often illustrated in very literal terms in *Little Fish*. Helping Jude to manage his NIA, Emma has him rehearse stories of their courtship and relationship. He frequently struggles, either misremembering or drawing blanks—and so she feeds the memories to him, helping him compose his, their, and her past.

Others are not only integral in building and maintaining our recollections, but hold and reflect elements of our identity. To be known, held in mind, or loved by another helps define and maintain us, and loss of this erodes the self. Toles (2009) reflects on this in relation to one of the best-known and celebrated films on memory—Gondry's (2004) *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Toles explains the way the protagonist, Joel, loses a sense of himself when he undergoes a procedure to erase memories of his relationship with his former lover, Clementine:

Expelling from his memory everything that Clementine was for him, everything she gave to him, and perhaps most crucially *everything she made of him* leaves Joel not simply in a reduced state but in an unintelligible one. (p. 135, emphasis added)

Toles frames this final point through what he terms 'you-ness' (p. 136), based on the work of Adriana Cavarero as described by Judith Butler:

I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no "you" to address, then I have lost "myself"... [O]ne can reference an "I" only in relation to a "you": without the "you," my own story becomes impossible. (Butler 2001, p. 24, cited in Toles 2009, pp. 134–35)

In removing his memories of Clementine, Joel loses the experience of having his existence witnessed by another.

In *Little Fish*, Emma continually reinforces Jude's story from her position, reminding him of who he is in her eyes. She has become the keeper of his memory and identity—reflecting to herself, 'Do I know you better than you know yourself? Right now, maybe.' When he realises his illness is becoming advanced, Jude reads out a letter to her trying to capture what he still knows of himself—a large part of this being his relationship with her:

Dear Emma,

I wanted to write this to you—I wanted to say this to you—while I still have as much of me as I do ... so that I could look you in the eye, in case—before I'm all gone—and tell you that you are the love of my life. ... you make me feel like I'm not alone ... as well, I love you because you stayed ... And you got me through each day. ...

Jude's letter to Emma acts as a tangible record of his 'you-ness'. Her presence has provided support and affection, but more than this has kept his sense of self and composure intact.

This constituting or maintaining of his identity might also be understood in terms of the philosophical stance that through love, we form a union with another that redefines us. Nozick (1989) argues that to love is to create a 'we' that extends our identity. Nussbaum (1990) contends that love not only makes us interdependent with another, but that we are defined in part by those we love. Hence, as seen with Joel and Clementine, to lose a love is to lose a part of ourselves. In this sense, Jude's letter represents the constitution of self not only through being known, held in mind, or loved *by* another, but by *loving* another. The film explores the extent to which this strength of love can maintain one's sense of the past and self.

4. The Body and the Unconscious

Despite the erosion of their conscious memories, Emma and Jude hold onto hope and conviction that there is something deeper binding them together. Emma declares, 'They say you can't forget feelings. And I still believe that. Even after Ben.'; 'They lost each other. But I won't lose you.' As their conscious memories start to fade, the couple tune into what is left: the feeling between them—both the intangible sense of connection and the physical

sensation of touch. Lying in bed together, Emma says to Jude, ‘Do you know that there’s a type of memory exclusively tied to touch? Haptic memory’. He replies, ‘I haven’t forgotten how you feel.’ As his hands traverse her, it feels as though he is trying to commit her body to memory, while she is trying to commit his touch to hers. In another scene Jude is trying to recall their wedding day, but struggles and significantly misremembers the details, leaving both crestfallen. He embraces Emma and again reassures her, ‘I haven’t forgotten how I feel.’

These moments speak to memory beyond conscious recognition or recollection, that is felt or embodied. Fuchs (2020) argues that the physical body contains a lived history of experience, which he terms ‘body memory’. This type of memory:

envision the past not in retrospect, but contains it as accumulated and currently effective experience. It is actualized through the medium of the body without requiring us to recall earlier situations . . . or in other words, it is our *lived past*. (p. 668, original emphasis)

Fuchs’ work draws on that of Henri Bergson, who proposed two types of memory: habit-memory and recollection or image-memory—the former an implicit and non-representational ‘motor memory’ of the body, and the latter an explicit representation of an event or episode (Bergson 1911; Perri 2014). While Emma spends hours coaching Jude in his recollection memory, trying to restore episodes and images of the past but witnessing them slipping away, it is his body and stored physical experience that remains and instinctively remembers the feeling of her, without conscious recall.

The body therefore represents a core element to both memory and identity. Fuchs argues:

We see how the continuous embodiment of existence produces a form of memory which from birth on integrates a person’s past into her present bodily constitution. Far from ensuring solely an anonymous, pre-reflective existence, the habitual body always forms an excerpt of personal history. It is the expression of our individuality at all levels, not just in the sophisticated ways of self-reflective thought, autobiographical memory or verbal interaction. (Fuchs 2020, p. 669)

Fuchs sees this aspect of embodiment as having been neglected by influential philosophical conceptions of the self. He refers to the work of John Locke, in which selfhood is based on the ability to self-reflect and consciously remember: ‘the identity of a person reaches only as far as his memory of himself remains intact’ (Fuchs 2020, p. 666). Without conscious memory, then, identity is not possible. However, Fuchs suggests that this is only part of the picture—that identity and memory are also constituted by the ongoing material body:

The foundational continuity of a person does not depend on a stock of explicit knowledge and memories or his own biography. It depends, on the one hand, on the subject’s bodily self-familiarity: the pre-reflective awareness of self that never fully leaves us. And it is based furthermore on body memory, in other words, on a history accumulated, sedimented in the body and, as such, implicitly always present. (p. 669, original emphasis)

From this perspective, loss of conscious memory does not equate to a loss of self.

This holds critical implications for the treatment of people with memory loss. Fuchs is specifically concerned with the experience of dementia. He warns against viewing people with dementia purely in terms of ‘rational’, self-reflective, and verbal interactions, arguing instead for a ‘person-centred’ approach that focuses on the individual’s body, expression and behaviour (Fuchs 2020, p. 673). Rebecca Bitenc also underscores the embodied, as well as relational, aspects to identity, and critiques dominant narratives that define dementia ‘as a tragic “loss of self” and “death before death”’ (Bitenc 2019, pp. 3–4). In his discussion of love and memory in *Eternal Sunshine*, Toles ends the piece by reflecting on his relationship

with his mother, aged 89, who has Alzheimer's. He explains that although on the phone they have difficulty relating and conversing, in person something feels different: 'Whenever I am actually in her presence, though, I feel (for a time at least) that both of us are restored to each other on our old footing' (p. 146). This suggests the impact of the body in reconnecting with memory and identity, through a relational exchange, in a way that words or conscious recollection cannot achieve.

The physical body also encases inner and intangible elements of the self that might not be seen or tangibly expressed. Bitenc describes the ongoing subjectivity of an individual with dementia:

This subjective perspective on the world, I argue, persists until the very end, as people with dementia continue to experience their being-in-the-world as long as they are alive. By contrast, the social identities or personae of a person with dementia may indeed be eroded, both by disease processes and social interactions, relatively early on. (pp. 11–12)

This distinction between subjective experience and social identity has similarities with Michael Roper's distinction between subjectivity and identity. Roper, a scholar of both history and psychoanalysis, argues that much scholarship in memory studies (in particular the concept of 'composure') focuses too heavily on the 'overlay' of social and cultural codes in identity and memory formation, while ignoring the 'underlay'—the workings of the unconscious. He explains, 'if you ask me how I differentiate subjectivity from identity, I would say that identity concerns the cultural resources out there that actors draw upon to construct a sense of self, but that I am also interested in the emotional experiences that constitute subjectivity' (Roper 2007, p. 253). These conceptions of subjectivity and the unconscious can be used to account for the messier, sometimes inarticulable, inner elements of the self and the body—the parts of us that are not cognisant or spoken. As Roper says, and as depicted when Jude tells Emma he hasn't forgotten how he feels, some experiences are 'felt as things in themselves rather than as memories' (p. 253).

Some of the pain felt being around people we love who have dementia or memory loss might be understood as the tensions between their ongoing subjectivity or unconscious and their 'fading' identity, between recognition and loss. In *Little Fish*, Emma reflects on their friend Ben in what feels like a eulogy—a maker and champion of music, a loving son and partner—'This is who we all remembered, who were clutching onto.' Later when Jude becomes unwell, she wonders, 'I wish I could look at him and just find what went missing. But he looks the same.' She recognises on the one hand the continuity of Jude's body and the sense of familiarity she feels towards him, but on the other the feeling of parts lost or missing. This discord speaks to deeper uncertainties around how much we can know or understand another or the bonds between us. Emma asks, 'What were we even trying to save? Our experiences together? Is that all I love about him?' How much are identity, memory and love based only on the cognisant accumulation of experience, and how much are these things intrinsic to and between people? The film seems to suggest that even if conscious memories erode, inherent feeling remains through the body, the unconscious, and love.

5. The Inevitability of Love

Emma: I was so sad the day I met you.

Jude: Why?

Emma: I can't remember. I just know that after I saw you I wasn't sad anymore.

Despite losing their conscious memories, Emma and Jude continue to reconnect. In the final scene of the film, the couple are on a holiday, trying to cherish their remaining

time together as best they can, when they fall into a conflict walking along the beach. Jude cannot remember Emma and, to both of their distress, starts ordering her to stay away from him. This time, touch does not work—she keeps trying to hold him but an unnerved Jude repeats, ‘Will you not touch me?’ He pushes Emma away and knocks her to the ground; she sits and begins to cry. As she tries to compose herself she is greeted by Blue, who seems to recognise her. But we discover that Emma does not recognise Blue, or worse still, Jude, who is walking back towards her. The couple speak to each other as strangers. This lands the viewer back in the opening scene of the film, and Emma’s opening words: ‘I was so sad the day I met you. I can’t remember why.’ However, we realise this moment on the beach was not their first encounter—rather, it mirrors their actual first encounter that Emma rehearsed with Jude following his NIA, in which they met at a local water park. In both scenes, she reports feeling sad but not knowing why, knowing only that she feels better upon seeing Jude. That is, despite struggling to recall conscious memories, she can remember the feeling, the emotional resonance and impact of his presence. This recurring feeling and encounter intimates to the audience an ongoing, deeper connection between these people.

Much of this is reminiscent of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Joel and Clementine, despite having had their memories of one another erased, find themselves drawn back to their place of meeting—interestingly also a beach, in Montauk—where they find each other again. We later discover, as we do with Emma and Jude, that this opening scene is not in fact their first meeting but their second. This ‘replacement beginning’ or ‘false beginning’, as Toles describes it, still feels real to each of the lovers (Toles 2009, p. 127). Toles suggests that despite the removal of their conscious memories, senses of Joel and Clementine are lodged somewhere deeper in each other’s minds (and perhaps bodies):

the plot also insists, with becoming romantic fervour, that even the successful obliteration of one’s entire history with another person would not deprive the lost figure of a lingering, and even beseeching, shadowy presence in consciousness. (p. 121)

Toles does not simply understand this as the beauty and romance of love and fate, but in Nietzschean philosophical terms of ‘eternal recurrence’—an ‘oppressive fatedness’ that means we replay scenes in our lives over and over (Toles 2009, p. 128; Nietzsche 2006). This has parallels with the Freudian notion of continually re-enacting events and relationships from our past, though Freud viewed this as a result of one’s past traumas rather than divine destiny (Freud 1961). Toles explains,

These ex-lovers have already done everything to each other that their narrative-ordained future together has prescribed for them, yet here they are, without foreknowledge or recollection, ready or condemned to begin anew. (pp. 126–27)

Similarly, Reeve (2009) reflects,

Coincidences happen. But the feeling the film creates is of inevitability, not happen-stance. Joel and Clementine, it tells us, had to meet in Montauk. Perhaps it produces this feeling by flirting with the paranormal—with fate, or kismet, or some muddled version of Nietzschean eternal return. Perhaps its message is that love’s roots lie too deep for science, because they lie outside the reality that is science’s theatre of operations. (p. 29)

Both *Eternal Sunshine* and *Little Fish* suggest that memory, identity, and love are lodged somewhere deeper in ourselves or the universe than can be understood or studied clinically. Emma spends countless hours poring over books on memory, and makes a futile attempt to surgically operate on Jude, but what saves them is the feeling they have upon encountering one another again in their relational loop. Fiction and art offer channels to explore topics

as complex and shadowy as love and fate in ways that scientific study cannot because their medium is more open-ended (Nietzsche's best-known text on eternal recurrence, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is a work of fiction). Whether these films are suggesting that fate sustains love, or love is fate, both suggest that even after conscious recollection is removed or eroded, memory and the self continue somewhere deeper in the body, the unconscious, and love—that one's identity is in part constituted by being loved *by* and *loving* another, but also through a connection to love's fatedness. These fictional works hold particular power in their ability to evoke feeling, beyond intellectual cognition. Much has been written on the significance of affect in understanding ourselves (Deleuze and Guattari 1994; Rogers 1961; Greenberg 2008). It is also feeling—through tactile bodies, intangible expressions of the unconscious, and love—that constitutes our memories and identities.

6. Conclusions

Through a love story, *Little Fish* explores the relationships between memory and identity, and the impacts of loss upon these complex processes. It portrays how the loss of conscious memories can erode previous understandings of self, but also how the enduring presence of subjectivity, the body, the unconscious, and love can maintain a sense of self. These issues relating to love, loss, memory, and identity are particularly relevant in an era when dementia is becoming more widespread amid ageing populations. Yet it should be noted that the film drives home the tragedy of memory loss through the experiences of a young and conventionally attractive couple. Perhaps more relevant and just as tragic, if not more so, would be the tale of an older couple who have shared decades together. This might represent a general reluctance in Hollywood to look at the experiences of elderly people, and a deeper discomfort in Western cultures around ageing and death. Haneke's (2012) *Amour* is an exception to this: the story of an elderly couple, Georges and Anne, dealing with Anne's decline following a stroke. Haneke's depiction of this process is as tender and affecting as it is unflinching, exploring the profundity and beauty of love, but also the fear, disgust, and violence of death and decay. Though *Little Fish* does not depict these realities, it does raise questions about the relationship between memory and love, an area worthy of ongoing attention within memory studies scholarship. Toles (2009) reflects,

I would argue that the majestic power of memory (as a force of good in our lives) is as neglected in contemporary discourse as the power of love. Perhaps we need to be persuaded yet again that memory and love are the most vital agents of continuity in our lives. (p. 134)

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