



The past is a construct of the mind

## Description

“The past is a construct of the mind. It blinds us. It fools us into believing it,” according to Matthias in the scifi film *Total Recall* (2012). It’s common for block busters to include a couple of lines of quotable pop philosophy as an intellectual challenge amid the fights and



ing around with ideas about simulation and reality as in *Total Recall*.

Philosophers of history such as Edward Carr, Hayden White

and Keith Jenkins provide more nuanced propositions about time. Hayden White argues that historians need to “consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (82). Edward Carr summarises this view by affirming that the contents of historical narratives are “as much invented/imagined as found” (144).

The facts of history are never “purely objective” according to Carr. Events “become facts of history only in virtue of the significance attached to them.” As everyone knows, history is a matter of interpretation. According to Keith Jenkins, in *Re-Thinking History*,



The world is not yet ready for the kind of extreme skepticism that asserts the past never really existed or is simply a construct of the mind.



## Bibliography

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## Notes

- Total Recall (2012) is based on the short story by Philip K. Dick *We Can Remember It for You Wholesale* (1990), which has no character called Matthias who makes such a statement about the past. (I found the story online as a PDF.) Nor does the famous 1990 film *Total Recall* starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.
- I also found a full copy of Carr's classic *What is History* online, but without page numbers.
- The statement by Matthias is pretty woolly. What does "it" refer to? If it's the past that blinds us into believing in the past then to do this the past must exist. If it's the mind that blinds us into believing the past exists then I think that's George Berkeley's subjective idealism. "It" in the statement is a floating indexical occurring 3 times, for which you could substitute "past" and "mind" in 8 ways (2 to the power of 3) I think.
- For an amusing take on the teaching of art history read Brian Sewell's article in the [THE](#).
- For an excellent account of Dick's writing related to architecture see Fortin, David T. 2011. *Architecture and Science Fiction Film: Philip K Dick and the Spectacle of Home*. London: Ashgate
- Also see blog posts tagged [Memory](#).

## Category

1. Film and media

## Tags

1. history
2. time
3. total recall

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