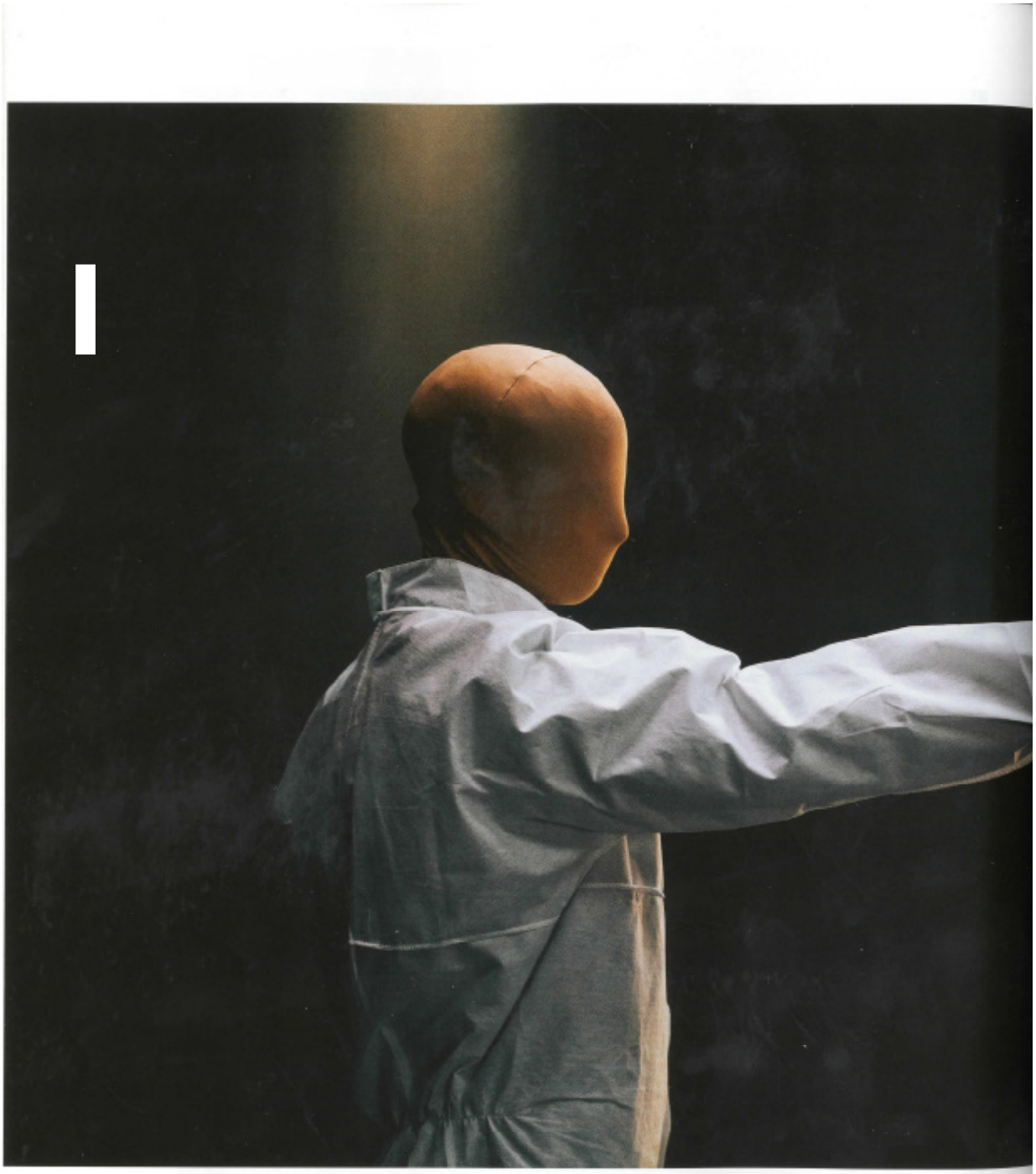
Art in America

Osterweil, Willie, "Never Forget," *Art in America*, December 2015



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NEVER FORGET

Omer Fast: *Remainder*, 2015, film, 97 minutes. Courtesy Soda Pictures, London. © Chris Harris.

In his first feature film, video artist Omer Fast continues to explore questions of memory and power.

by Willie Osterweil

EVERY TWO MINUTES more photos are taken in the United States than were taken worldwide in the entire 19th century:[1] the rate of capturing and tracking images and biographical facts (purchases, movement, contacts, etc.) is increasing exponentially. Though these possibilities have been most thoroughly explored by the surveillance state, Silicon Valley boosters sell the idea that life, once sufficiently transformed into data, can be not only be significantly improved but also perfectly recorded and "remembered." Once quantified, they claim, moments become permanently available to live through again and again.[2]

Beyond the obvious holes in this hype—is looking at a picture really the same as reliving a moment; do computers never crash, files never corrupt, devices never go obsolete and unusable?—there is the question of who might like to see the present reproduced forever. For those who (thanks to their gender, race, class, ability and sexuality) are at the top of social hierarchies, the past usually doesn't hold as much violence and trauma as it does for those on the bottom. To them, such control over lived moments looks like heaven. But for those who would suffer from government and corporate entities having easy access to their personal histories, it looks more like hell. Memory, in any case, has become a terrain of political and technological contestation.

The violence that looms behind such a "perfect" memory is central to *Remainder*, a film by Omer Fast that premiered at London's Tate Modern in October, and to British artist Tom McCarthy's 2005 novel of the same name, on which Fast's film is based. An unnamed protagonist (who is also the narrator of the novel) is crushed by a mysterious object that falls from the sky. Upon waking from a coma, he has almost no memory and has to learn how to walk and eat again. He's told that lawyers have won him an £8.5 million

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Omer Fast: Present Continuous," at the Jeu de Paume, Paris, through Jan. 24, 2016.

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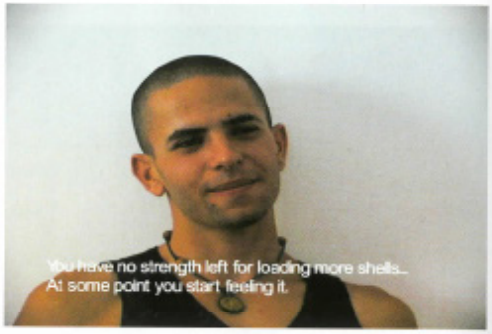

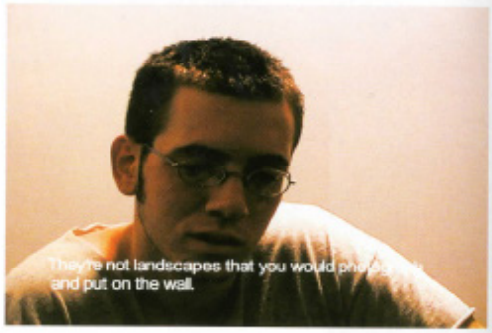

Four s from *A Tax* 2002, eo, four chann 3-7 minut ach.

All images, unless otherwise noted, courtesy gb agency, Paris; Arratia Beer, Berlin; and Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv.

($13 million) settlement. One night he has an intense, fragmentary memory or vision—it's not entirely clear which—and he decides to spend his new fortune on re-creating it. He buys a building, renovates it to fit his exacting specifications and fills it with actors who perform at his whim, reliving a few brief moments again and again. The absurdity of the task gives way to horror as he begins to demand more and more from his staff, and then sets about staging increasingly violent episodes—a murder, a bank robbery—in search of a moment that contains a perfectly authentic experience.

McCarthy wrote *Remainder* in 2001, during a major wave of urban redevelopment in London (it took him four years to find a publisher). The novel traces a search for the "authentic" in an alienated social world, a search that also typifies gentrification and many gentrifiers' relationship to the cities they've moved to. They flee the car-dominated and corporatized suburbs where they grew up in search of "real" community; they flood city neighborhoods where street life and urban spontaneity can be experienced.

Remainder's plot hinges on the predatory economic activity, the displacement of racial minorities and the social and physical violence that this quest for authenticity involves. The protagonist evicts the building's tenants to make way for his re-creations. He exploits his reenactors, forcing them to work around the clock, and he lovingly stages a fantasy of "black-on-black" gang murder on the street outside his building.

Fast's adaptation is no less politically engaged. Indeed, Fast has introduced small changes that resolve the novel's problematic treatment of race. For instance, while McCarthy's version of the gang violence naturalizes random black criminality even as it critiques the protagonist's consumption thereof, Fast has the protagonist fantasize that the shooting is a gang-instigated drive-by, when in fact the young black man is killed by mysterious agents looking for the protagonist. But Fast is less focused on questions of the real or the authentic and how they shape economic activity and urban development than he is on the violence that can be deployed to re-create a memory or realize a vision.

As artists, both McCarthy and Fast are interested in the question of their materials and the nature of their process. McCarthy is known as general secretary of the International Necronautical Society (INS), an "organization" that produces discussions, manifestos and reports about its work—but these documents are the only work it does. The production of the sort of intellectual and cultural apparatus that might form around a specialized field is offered as a parody of such apparatuses. Fast's previous video work, which often refers to documentary-making traditions, foregrounds the role of the filmmaker in producing a particular "truth," thereby questioning the validity of the documentary form itself. The "true story" that the documentary represents, like the activity that a collective like INS is expected to do, recedes to the background as the artist examines the social structures that take shape around it.

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As a repetitive, obsessive story about repetitive, obsessive storytelling, *Remainder* is such a self-aware novel that many episodes come across as tongue-in-cheek. Fast is equally self-conscious. In one part of *Remainder*, the protagonist hires a film crew so he can get a permit to stage a reenactment on a city street, even though he has no interest in recording the event—the crew's there just to satisfy bureaucratic requirements. In the novel it's a sly critique of big-budget movie production, which also involves the construction of a precisely detailed physical space to enact a hyper-specific oment. But Fast makes it a full-bodied reflexive maneuver, a eans of questioning the process and ethics of filmmaking itself.

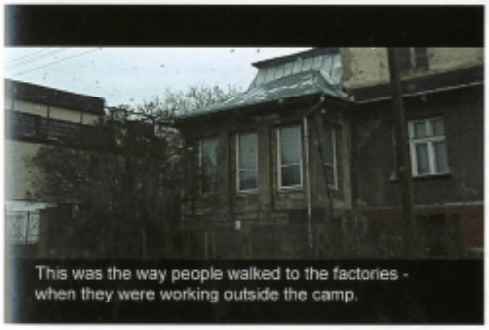
EMAINDER IS A perfect tale for adaptation by Fast. His previous works have addressed the violence of storytelling and memory through interviews with subjects whose social roles are politically charged: soldiers, sex workers, first responders, refugees and drone pilots. Fast was born and raised in Israel, received an MFA from Hunter College in New York in 2000 and has lived in Berlin since 2001. His work often reflects his many residences by addressing the political and military issues of the U.S., Israel and Germany.

A Tank Translated (2002), is a four-channel installation in which Fast interviews the four members of an Israeli Defense Forces tank crew. The interviews play simultaneously on monitors that are placed on plinths to mark the positions of the soldiers in the tank. Fast conducted the interviews in Hebrew, his native language, and the English subtitles on each channel flip between seemingly direct translations of the soldiers' descriptions of their experiences of attacking and policing Palestinians with the tank and grammatically similar evocations of what it's like to work on a film crew. This draws an immediate parallel between soldiering and filmmaking, which can be an accessory to state violence by manipulating images and information to justify coercive acts. But, as Fast's interview process shows, the same acts of construction and control can be performed in the process of remembering. Memory, too, is a political weapon.

Filmmaking can be an accessory to state violence, by manipulating images and information to justify coercive acts.

In *Spielberg's List* (2003), Fast takes his critique of filmmaking to Hollywood, interviewing extras from the concentration camp scenes of *Schindler's List* as well as tour guides at museums built on actual concentration camp sites. The installation has two screens showing identical footage of the interviews but subtitled with different translations. One set of subtitles relates memories of making *Schindler's List*, while the other refers to the real history of the Holocaust. As with *A Tank Translated*, the grammatical and structural similarities of these two subtitle tracks draw an eerie parallel between filmmaking about state violence and state violence itself. An extra who played an SS guard describes the film production's use of real medical lists from the concentration camps—lists not pictured on-screen (though visible to him and other actors), because they might be deeply upsetting. This point is driven home by interviews with the oldest extras, themselves Holocaust survivors, whose descriptions of being in the camps and being on the set are confusingly intermingled in Fast's editing. *Spielberg's List* suggests that historical reenactment can unleash the trauma of those who lived through the history it represents and who still suffer its effects. There is thus a heavy responsibility on those who would do so.

But Spielberg and the Hollywood industry he stands for unleash this trauma in order to profit and entertain: he and his investors made nearly $300 million after expenses. And *Schindler's List* also led to a boom in Holocaust tourism in Poland. A tour guide tells Fast that after the film's release, most American tourists visiting Krakow asked only to see places depicted in the movie, so a special Schindler's List Tour was developed in response. Through his film, Spielberg has had incredible influence on the popular understanding of the Holocaust. The process by which he gained such power had dramatic, even violent, personal effects on those who lived through the experiences depicted and those who participated in the film. And, as the Holocaust remains a significant political justification for the actions of the state of Israel, influence on its popular understanding means influence on fundamental issues of contemporary geopolitics.



Two stills from *Spielberg's List*, 2003, two-channel video, 60 minutes.

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Production still from *The Casting*, 2007, video, 18-minute loop.

Thus Fast shows how, both in its production and in its effects, filmmaking can use memory and history to command political and economic power in the present.

The Casting (2007), a four-channel installation, takes these questions of control, memory and political violence to an almost transcendent level of horror. Fast interviewed an American soldier who served in Iraq and lived on a U.S. military base in Germany, then edited the interview footage to blend a story of how he accidentally killed an Iraqi civilian by firing into a car at a road block with an account of a date with a seemingly manic-depressive German woman. It's not always clear which one is being told.

Parts of the video deliberately merge the stories. On one screen we see two channels displaying a series of tableaux vivants. One channel shows a reenactment of the interview and the process of filming it, with actors playing both Fast and the soldier on an empty sound stage. On the other channel, actors mime scenes from the stories (the soldier firing into a car at a roadblock, the soldier riding on the Autobahn with his date, etc.). The other screen reveals the artist's manipulation of the story. Its two channels feature very simple close-ups of Fast and the soldier. The role of Fast's editing becomes obvious, even violent, as the cuts that give the audio track its blurry coherence become a series of jump cuts that show Fast and his interviewee with different positions, outfits and lighting.

By foregrounding the soldier's remorse over the shooting of an innocent Iraqi, an event that he describes as "one of my worst days," the film shows how narrative can make a compassionate hero out of almost anyone. The protagonist's role always draws sympathy, and the storyteller, by selecting and framing the protagonist, has the power to direct sympathy. Fast's self-conscious editing and his counterpoint of visuals and audio emphasize how any claim to portraying truth in documentary is politically charged and contested, while forcing viewers to recognize the implications of their own identification with the soldier.

This critique of documentary is only one part of the work, of course. The tableaux vivants and the audio track directly address the horrors of war and occupation. But the reflexive moves described above keep the work from becoming self-congratulatory: by indicating his own role in representing the soldier's violence, Fast eschews self-righteousness. There is no moral preening in *The Casting*. Instead, the work is destabilizing and disturbing. Fast's role is ambivalent—after all, he's speaking with the soldier, not the victims. We're forced to reconcile our sympathy for the soldier with the scope of this moment of terrifying violence.

FAST'S EARLIER VIDEO work tends to have simple shots of interview subjects and to mostly show off his virtuosic editing. *CNN Concatenated* (2002), which prefigures the supercut and other algorithm-aided video-editing techniques, isolates words and syllables spoken by CNN anchors and stitches them into the stream of ideological fear-mongering that, Fast implies, CNN already is. But in recent years he has turned toward a markedly more cinematic style. *Take a Deep Breath* (2008), the

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Four stills from *The Casting*, 2007.

film that followed *The Casting*, similarly features a restaging of an event described in an interview (in this case, a suicide bombing at a Jerusalem falafel shop), cross- and counter-cut with "behind-the-scenes" shots of the cast and crew. Instead of the tableaux vivants of *The Casting*, the scenes are fully acted out, with actors and crew shot together in motion, though it's unclear whether the crew members pictured are really the ones who made the film or yet more actors.

Fast's oeuvre up until *Remainder* might be seen as a fugue. In each work, the subject, as it were, is an interview about memories with politicized ramifications, shot on video and displayed simply. But countersubjects—the artifice of cinematography and film-production techniques, aggressive editing, narrative and acting—are slowly introduced and played against the main theme, making it increasingly difficult to recognize where, if anywhere, the "truth" lies. Fast's early works have few of these countersubjects; in *A Tank Translated* they are the shifts of subtitles across the four channels. But as Fast developed as an artist he added more: reenactments of the events described, actors to play himself and his interviewees, fictional narrative. Eventually the footage of the original interview falls away entirely, yet Fast manages to maintain an immediacy and a sense of documentary truth through these aesthetic shifts.

5000 Feet Is the Best is a case in point. A short that debuted at the Venice Biennale in 2011, it features an interview with a drone pilot in a strange Las Vegas hotel room. Again, both filmmaker and interviewee are actors (the drone pilot is played by Denis O'Hare, a recognizable character actor), and it's not at all clear how much of the dialogue is a transcript and how much is written by Fast. In production value, this work resembles a big-budget film even more than *The Casting* or *Take a Deep Breath* do, to say nothing of Fast's first experimental video works. As the drone pilot talks, we see breathtaking, lush helicopter shots of suburbs, countryside, mountains, cities and small towns, which give us, we realize with horror, a drone's-eye view of the world. The murderous surveillance apparatuses of the modern world were anticipated by filmmaking—by boom cameras, by balloon and airplane aerial "shots," a word whose ugly doubleness Fast returns to again and again throughout his work.

Remainder moves away from the fugal nature of Fast's work: as a full-length narrative feature, although not a straightforward one by any means, it signals a departure from the melding of documentary and fiction that marked his style. Yet it maintains the same core concerns: the ethics of storytelling and memory, particularly in cinema, and the psychological violence committed in the name of recreating or reliving a memory.

In *Remainder*, Fast reaches for the contemplative register of films by Andrei Tarkovsky: beautiful imagery, stilted dialogue, alienated and abstract action fraught with significant philosophical tension. And there is a moment within the film in which I was brought—for reasons I didn't understand at the time and even now, weeks later, can only faintly grasp—to a level of such intense understanding, sensitivity and awe that I suddenly began to weep. It is a moment of perfect memory

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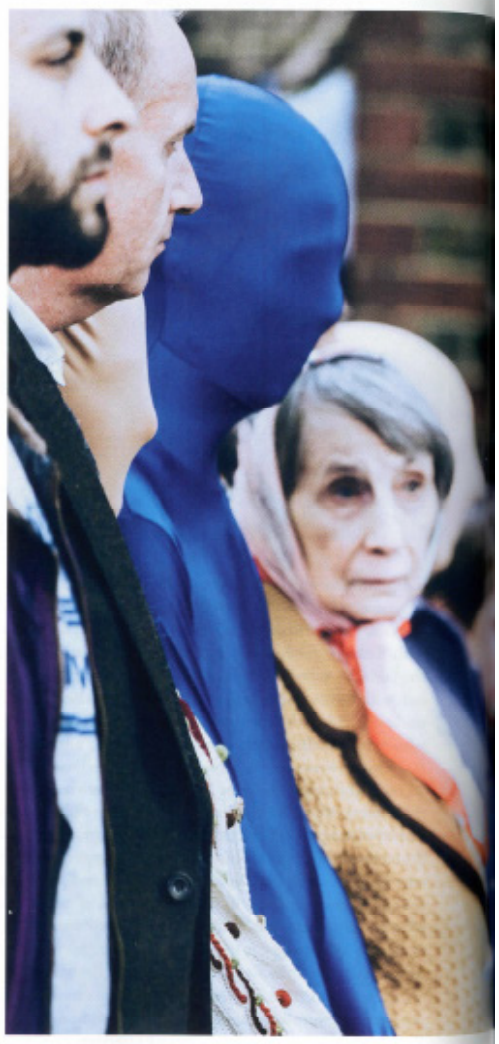
for the protagonist. A vision he has been seeing and attempting to re-create throughout the film—a small boy reaching toward him—comes to pass. He achieves what he has been searching for, a real, authentic moment, one Fast has been subtly and slowly preparing us for, and we experience that perfection with the protagonist. It is cinematically joyous: the music swells, the action moves into a reverential slow motion. But it is simultaneously a moment of total horror and surreality in the narrative: the protagonist has just murdered a number of his employees in a reenactment of a bank robbery that, without informing his staff, he made real, and the boy reaches toward him in a fearful state of trauma.

This is, however, the vision that the protagonist's entire process of reenactment was meant to reproduce. It is significant that the moment was not a memory, as we had been led to believe, but a vision: Fast shows how difficult it can be to distinguish between memory, imagination and creation. As such this one moment captures, without dialogue, without text, but completely cinematically, one of the fundamental critiques Fast has been working on throughout his career: how in the name of memory and nostalgia we can colonize and destroy, how much power lies in control over stories and memories, and how we seek to dominate the present in our desires to see them reproduced.

The fantasy of an infallible memory drives not only mad fictional protagonists but also many of the minds in tech and government. The last decade has seen an explosion of ways to track, record and quantify life—from Apple Watch to Facebook Timeline to heart-monitoring and step-counting apps. The near-perfect overlap of these mass-market technologies with state apparatuses of mass surveillance may reflect the fact that they are often financed, directly or indirectly, by military and government funding. Whether selling data scraped by marketing systems to the police or normalizing drones by selling them to hobbyist filmmakers, tech corporations profit from mutually beneficial relationships with governments.

Fast's work points to why tech companies and the state might want to develop machines for recording everything. These forces of total memory would create a world without errors of recollection, without forgetting. But as Fast's work also shows, this world is impossible, as memory is always just a retelling, a reorienting, a politicized engagement and struggle with the past, just a story at the mercy of those who would tell it. As such, these dreams can be seen for what they are, fantasies of power itself, of total domination. Those who control the past, in this myth, control the present. Those who would practice storytelling, in politics or in art, would do well to remember that. ○



Remainder, 2015. Courtesy Soda Pictures. © Chris Harris.

1. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, London, Pelican, 2015, p. 6.
2. In a 2010 talk in Vienna, futurologist Raymond Kurzweil, who advises governments and corporations on tech-related issues, predicted that "within the next 20 years we will have thousands of nanobot computer machines in our blood that will heal our bodies, improve our performance, and even be able to back up all the contents of our brains, just as you back up your files on a computer. That means they would back up every thought, every experience, everything that makes us an individual." See "Humans Able to Back Up Their Brain and Its Memories Within Two Decades, Claims Top Scientist," dailymail.co.uk, Oct. 21, 2010.

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OMER FAST