

GEM2005/HY2243 Film & History

Project 2

History is memories of the past. What do these three films tell us about the role of memory in constructing our understanding of the past?

Memory is the product of mental processing of past events, unique to each individual. In this sense, history is inextricably linked to memories of the past. 'Rashomon' explores the study of history and dispels notions of the truth in historical study. By entrusting viewers with the task of assessing the various accounts of the murder, it confers upon them the same dilemmas that historians face as they attempt to filter facts from fiction and distill a reconstruction of the past. The problem of selective memory that is an unavoidable aspect of oral history reveals that there is no absolute 'truth' to be discovered, only the most accurate account after subjecting it to rigorous academic scrutiny. Thus, the film documents the limitations of history with respect to the "truth" and introduces the idea of interpretative history where history is never objective as it is continuously being influenced by its participant's understanding of it.

'Memento' deals with anterograde amnesia, an extreme manifestation of an inability to form memories, exploring the involuntary aspect of memory loss and also the ability to doctor, tamper and alter memory deliberately. Memory is portrayed as constructed rather than a mere copying process in 'Memento', implying that it easily manipulates our interpretation of personal history that is instrumental in forming identities. Memory is not wholly representative of the past; it reflects an underlying personal need to believe certain truths. It enables links between different events and creates a conception of time. Leonard attempts to document only 'certainties' by tattooing his body with facts yet he cannot escape the emotional aspect of memory that is

so intrinsic to human nature. Therefore, he exploits his own condition by consciously choosing to allow himself to believe what he knew was false, to give himself a reason to live after avenging his wife and fabricating false memories such as that of Sam Jenkins, to document his own personal tragedy yet distance himself from it. 'Memento' suggests that repressing certain memories is crucial to survival. Hence, memory is not a reliable documentation of the past but a coping mechanism, a discriminating process to omit potentially debilitating information and to make sense of it by finding a purpose in the past.

The relationship between Clementine and Joel in 'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind' is a metaphor for larger historical concerns such as the value of retaining unpleasant memories and the relationship between memories and emotions. Steve Johnson elucidates this point, writing that memories effectively get rewritten every time they are activated due to a process called reconsolidation. Thus, the associative aspect of memory interferes with attempts to document history accurately as our perceptions of what happened are constantly being changed. 'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind' suggests that erasing unpleasant memories are a way of postponing dealing with truths about our personality we choose to ignore that will always pose a problem. Memory therefore enables us to grow as individuals and to avoid being trapped in a nihilistic cycle by learning from hindsight.