

Your Name: AC

Your Group:

GEM2005/HY2243 Film & History

Project 2

Rashomon (1950)

Director: Akira Kurosawa. Written by Akira Kurosawa and Hashimoto Shinobu; based on short stories by Ryunosuke Akutagawa

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004)

Director: Michel Gondry. Writing credits: Charlie Kaufman, Michel Gondry, and Pierre Bismuth

Memento (2000)

Director: Christopher Nolan. Writing credits: Christopher Nolan and Jonathan Nolan

Project Instructions

Discuss the topic below with your project group using the IVLE. Then submit your own individual answer to the History Department Office (AS1/05-27) by noon Friday September 16. No late papers will be graded. Maximum word limit: 500. Please type and print a copy of your project. No email attachments.

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?

In Bill Schwarz's "Already In The Past," Schwarz contends that the fallibility of human memory is "...the reason why historiography is required." In lieu of his comment, and the three films, this project aims to focus on both the collective and individual memory, as effective agents in the construction of genuine human understandings of the past.

In *Rashomon*, memory can be best quantified as an agent of truth, or the lack of it. A murder is committed, but everyone involved sees the event differently. We are never told the truth – instead we're forced to reflect on the individual accounts of the characters themselves. The absurdity of this – that there is no real truth to be told, can be seen as the interpretive notion that since even individual memory is never faultless, how then can we ever believe what anyone says? The starting line goes "I just don't understand this story," evidently highlighting the dangers of agreeing on one truth, of simply, the facts.

It is precisely the “facts” of Leonard Shelby that sees the main character setting himself for apparently, self-destruction. Memento sets us in the shoes of memory-losing Leonard on his elusive search for John G. He finds him of course, at the very of the start of the film. Eventually, we learn that Leonard manipulates himself in chasing his own ghosts, that he adamantly refuses to acknowledge his own horrific past. Leonard always starts from ground zero, he tells himself what he wants to hear, he constructs his own memories, again and again. The past is changed for the sake of Leonard’s hunt. And what about us? John Urry warns us that contemporary societies too, like Leonard, tend to make “legends” out of the past, that history should never only be the “prerogative of the historian.” We must take in all the considerations, to stop and think, and to make choices of our past.

Choice of course, is one of the two driving themes of *The Eternal Sunshine of The Spotless Mind*. The other, is emotion. Traumatic experiences directly impact on our decisions in remembering/forgetting the past, both on the individual and collective scale. Steven Johnson cites a line from the movie to separate it from *Memento*, when Joel says “It’s amazing how strong the feeling is.” The film explores the scenario of two star-crossed lovers, and their ability to forget each other completely if given the choice. Is ignorance bliss? Apparently not. Joel chooses to resume his relationship with Clementine, after he’s given a “spotless mind” – the film is a parable of how human life can never be a one-sided emotional affair.

Indeed, memory’s role in the construction of our past is crucial. It affects the very essence of being human, be it in our never-ending quest for truth in *Rashomon*, our own predominating need for self satisfaction and identity in *Memento* or the tragic handling of emotional baggage that comes our way – the past is in our minds, in our memories, and in our lives.