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“Have You Seen *The Notebook*?” “I Don’t Remember.” Using Popular Cinema to Teach Memory and Amnesia



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Overview

The recent influx of films addressing different aspects of memory loss inspired the development of an upper-level undergraduate seminar that focuses on investigating amnesia through the lens of popular cinema. This discussion-based course included several written assignments and, at the end of one semester, a comprehensive take-home exam. Over the course of four semesters, a bank of student-authored discussion questions for each reading was collected and a list of topics and corresponding movies was honed.

Course Description

The purpose of this course was to investigate how amnesia is portrayed in popular film and to analyze the extent to which these representations are consistent with empirical research on amnesia. The first few class meetings were spent establishing a framework of memory, studying such topics as whether there is more than one memory system, how memory is assessed, and how memory is improved. Subsequent days focused on discussing different types of amnesia, different causes of amnesia, and how damage to specific parts of the brain can affect memory. During each class, we watched assigned movies and/or discussed how amnesia is depicted using the knowledge we gained from readings and previous discussions.

Assigned Texts

- Howes, M. B. (2007). *Human memory: Structures and images*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Papanicolaou, A. C. (2006). *The amnesias: A clinical textbook of memory disorders*. New York, NY: Oxford.
- Parkin, A. J. (1997). *Memory and amnesia: An introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Select Journal Articles (see Syllabus)

Assignments

Short Projects: Students completed two short projects during this course. The options for these projects were to:

- Create an informative booklet on different types of amnesia.
- Write a letter to the Director of one of the movies we watched about the accuracy of his or her film.
- Give an in-class presentation arguing which of the movies we watched is the most accurate and write a short summary of that argument.
- Write a screenplay for a short film or a scene from a feature-length movie (e.g., doctor’s diagnosis scene) in which an amnesic character is portrayed. Submit an explanation for why you portrayed the character in this way based on assigned research.

Research Proposal: Students wrote research proposals for experiments that examine one of the aspects of amnesia that was covered throughout the semester. Proposal ideas were required to be original and ethical. Papers were typewritten reports that included a title page, introduction, method section, predicted results, and reference section. Proposals followed APA format and were graded based on the originality of the idea, the quality of the methodology, and the overall quality and thoroughness of the proposal. Topics for the proposal were submitted for pre-approval by the instructor.

Sample Topics & Corresponding Movies

Why Study Amnesia?	<i>Finding Nemo & The Muppets Take Manhattan</i>
Assessment of Memory Disorders	<i>Regarding Henry</i>
Retrograde Memory Impairments	<i>Overboard</i>
Anterograde Memory Impairments	<i>Memento</i>
Aging & Memory Impairment	<i>The Notebook</i>
“Erasing” Memories	<i>Paycheck & Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i>
Psychogenic Memory Disorders	<i>The Bourne Identity</i>
Malingering	<i>Primal Fear</i>

Final Exam

- **Take-Home Final Exam (1 semester):** Students were given the following 5 questions and instructed to respond to them in 300-350 words:
 - 1) Define retrograde amnesia and anterograde amnesia. Describe the characteristics of the Amnesic Syndrome (i.e., What cognitive and memory abilities are usually intact? What memories abilities are impaired?) Describe three specific examples of dissociations between impaired and intact abilities in the movies we’ve watched.
 - 2) What is a temporal gradient? Does it pertain to retrograde or anterograde impairments? Is this portrayed accurately in the movies we’ve watched? Give at least three specific examples and support your answer with research.
 - 3) Describe three causes of amnesia other than hitting one’s head. How are the symptoms of each similar? How are they different? Which movie characters best exemplify each etiology?
 - 4) Compare and contrast symptoms of organic amnesias to those of psychogenic amnesias. Be sure to address etiology, temporal gradient, types of memory lost, duration of memory loss, and recovery of lost memories. Provide examples from *Overboard* that support the argument that Joanna/Annie’s amnesia is psychogenic in origin.
 - 5) Listen to this NPR clip on Clive Wearing (approx. 15 minutes): <http://www.wnyc.org/shows/radiolab/episodes/2007/06/08/segments/71874> and watch this video clip of his current condition (approximately 7 minutes): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0DqgwWxyow>. Provide a synopsis of the information provided. Compare and contrast Clive’s case from that of Leonard (from *Memento*). Considering that Clive’s story is true, what differences in their stories reveal the inaccuracies of Leonard’s portrayal?

Sample Discussion Questions

Regarding Henry

- What is a “temporal gradient?” Does Henry show any evidence of one? Give specific examples.
- Describe Brandt & Benedict’s (1993) Oscar Test. How do you think Henry would perform on this test?
- Describe specific ways in which Henry’s personality changed after his injuries. According to Butters, Delis, & Lucas (1995), are these changes in personality common in any profiles of amnesia? If so, which profiles?

Overboard

- According to Kapur, what is the difference between postictal amnesia, preictal amnesia, and extended episodic retrograde amnesia? What is the relationship between these three types of impairment? Are Joanna’s/Annie’s impairments consistent with this notion?
- Is personality a synthesis of all previous episodic memories? Is it a part of semantic memory? What’s the difference between these two options? Can you know who you are without remembering any specific events from the past?

Memento

- Gilboa (2006) argues that hippocampal damage would leave familiarity-based memory intact. Does Lenny show signs of preserved familiarity-based memory? Is Lenny’s case consistent with Gilboa’s claims?
- Both Clive Wearing and Lenny describe their conditions as feeling like everything is happening for the first time. What are the similarities and differences between Lenny’s and Clive’s impairments?

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