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Communication Arts II

Midterm Paper

Memento and Shutter Island are consistent with Noir Films genre. Both films have several similarities in that they depict the mind of a mentally ill person trying to solve a mystery. Both films draw upon similar ideas and themes and leave the audience wondering what is going to happen next. The movies give insight into the unknown and an understanding one’s own reality.

Noir Films are a genre of filmmaking that creates a cinematographic style that portrays a mood of cynicism, pessimism and despair. “The Neo-noir films of the past decade or so explore the seamy underside of power, culturally authoritative institutions, chronicle the unraveling of the social fabric, and mediate on the psychology of obsession and paranoia.” (Macek)

Noir films tend to depict crimes with malicious intent and takes place in an ominous atmosphere. In the French language, Noir Film translates to “Black Film” or film of the night. This genre uses various lighting effects, flashbacks and intricate plot twists and turns to convey the story. Themes portrayed in noir films are dark and cynical, and tend to emphasize the shadowy, sadistic sides of human nature.

The movie Memento stars Guy Pierce who plays the role of Lenard Shelby. Lenard is a former insurance investigator who now spends his time trying to find the man who he thinks assaulted and murdered his wife. In that attack, he was injured and now suffers from a short-term memory deficit. Lenard’s memory now lasts a few minutes. Because of this, he has developed methods to help him keep track of what he has learned in his quest to find the murderer. He writes clues on bits of paper, on the back of Polaroid pictures, on a large paper that he hangs on his hotel wall, and most permanently, the tattoos all over his body. The movie is shot with the last scene being first and first being last. The fragmented nature of the narrative, the dark nature of the crime that he is looking to solve, and the fact that he is psychologically damaged are all instances of the Noir Film genre. “Any connection between noir and truthfulness might seem dubious, given the penchant in noir films for narrative experimentation, even fragmentation and for stylistic devices that throw the viewer’s ideal perspectives off balance.” (Hibbs)

In Shutter Island, Leonardo DiCaprio plays the role of Teddy Daniels, a US Marshal. Teddy is sent to a mental hospital on an island off the coast of Boston to investigate a missing patient. He is also there to find the man who started the fire that killed his wife, Andrew Laeddis. As the film goes on you see Teddy haunted by the traumatic flashbacks from when he was a solider in World War II. Teddy also hallucinated visions of his wife, who, as the film goes on, you learn that was mentally ill. Teddy knew of her condition but did nothing to help her. As a result of her mental illness, she drowned their children. In his guilt over not having been there to help her, he avenged the children’s death by murdering his wife.

The mental hospital where Teddy was running his investigation was progressive, trying to rehabilitate patients rather than drugging or torturing them as was the treatment of the times. To that end, they allowed Teddy to “role play” an alternative reality. At the end of the “role play” that the employees of the facility were all in on, he learned that he was Andrew Laeddis, the man who killed his wife. Allowing Teddy to play out his fantasy caused him to understand what he did. But in the end, the audience is left with one last line uttered by Teddy/Andrew: “This place makes me wonder, which would be worse, to live as a monster, or to die as a good man.” Did he choose to not live with this reality, or was he is just mentally ill? The investigation of a dark crime, the ominous environment (the island), the twists and turns of the story and the lack of a happy ending are all consistent with the Noir Film genre.

Both main characters are trapped in an alternate reality that they have created for themselves. Both Lenard Shelby and Teddy Daniels have experienced a traumatic event. Psychologically neither protagonist could handle the situation and come to conjure up and accept a reality of his own making. As the movies unravel, the audience becomes a part of the conspiracy developed by the protagonist and you go right along for the ride with them.

Both films have lines that are said by the main characters that provide a framework for the fragmented nature of the main character’s psyche and the plot of the stories. In Shutter Island Teddy says “Pull yourself together” when he is on the boat vomiting on his way to the island. This foreshadows, his fragmented reality, his fragmented self. In Memento, Lenard says, “Do I lie to myself to make myself happy?” this suggests that his lies help him deal with reality; if he gave up the lies, he would have to face his reality which would not be comfortable for him.

Both characters are consumed with the idea of taking revenge on the person that killed their respective wife. It becomes an obsession for both characters and it drives them to make the decisions that they do. Both protagonists in each story form alternate realities where they are investigators. In the case of Lenny, and a US Marshall in the case of Teddy. They try to make everyone around them believe their alternative reality and try to get others to go along with them as they unravel the mystery of the crime. Both movies lead the audience on a journey but end in very different places than anticipated. For the audience, going along with the plot and observing the labyrinths that the protagonists find themselves in does give the movie goer a sense of purpose to unlock those riddles, to find the hidden clues and the foreshadowing that allow you to experience the movies with a deeper understanding of the torment that both Lenny and Teddy suffer.

Throughout the movies both main characters are investigating crimes committed against their wives, which ultimately causes them to essentially investigate themselves. In Memento, Lenard takes Polaroid pictures on which he writes notes on the back in order to keep track of people, places and things. Lenard also gets tattoos on his body of the big clues to help him remember his mission of finding John G, his wife’s killer. In Shutter Island, Teddy jots notes on a notepad to keep track of the clues he uncovers. This act of tracking “the facts” as Lenny says causes both characters to believe them, and disregard any other interruption the “facts” might provide. They fall further into their alternate reality in their minds, but in the end, this actually leads them towards understanding what the other characters in the stories already know--that they are responsible for the murder of their wives.

After viewing both films the audience takes away the simple truth that you can’t always trust what you see, that things aren’t always as they seem. The events in the movies and especially the endings can be interpreted in different ways. Looking at the movies in different ways can be mind provoking to the viewer who wants to untangle the maze that is created in both plots.

Both movies have twists and turns that create this idea that things are not as they seem. The movies are psychological thrillers, and thus are taking audiences into an unknown reality that gets slowly uncovered. In Shutter Island “the narrative undercuts the atmosphere of menace that the rest of the film has produced: all the disturbing images, all the paranoid overtones, all the threatening conversations the audience has witnessed while following the mystery plot turn out to be nothing more than products of Laeddis’s psychosis.” (Mclancy)

Both films are psychological thrillers that center on a protagonist with mental illness. Some audiences may go in to a Film Noir movie expecting it to be like most other movies.They may be watching for the subtle clues for where the story is actually going to end rather than allow them to be led through all the twists and turns that the main characters want to take them on. This can be exciting for some, but may be also invoke a sense of anxiety for them. For the audience who might not have to deal with such mental illness this is very much an unknown. People fear mental illness, and after seeing the delusional impact on these two main characters, rightly so.

Both Shutter Island and Memento provide pieces of a puzzle that slowly come together, but in the end of both you are left with some questions and some doubts about whether you can trust the main characters. For Teddy in Shutter Island in the last scene the audience is left not knowing if he regressed back into his alternate reality or if he was fully aware of what he did and knowingly went off to be lobotomized as he couldn’t live with his crime. For Lenny in Memento the audience is left with the suspicion that he may have been sabotaging his memory, creating the lies because he can’t live with the crime he committed. In regard to Noir Film, “the conclusion is simple, the moral ambivalence, the criminality, the complex contradictions in motives and events, all conspire to make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity which are true emotions of contemporary film noir.” (Willis)

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