John Seamon’s Memory & Movies: What Films Can Teach Us about Memory

Review by Alan A. Stone, M.D.

Editor’s Note: From trauma to amnesia to senior moments, memory has been a major plot line in films since the 1942 classic, Random Harvest. John Seamon, an author and professor of psychology whose research includes how a camera aids memory and the impact of storytelling on memory, has shifted his lens to focus on how memory has been portrayed in one of the world’s most beloved art forms.
In lucid prose, John Seamon has explained almost everything we know about the several systems that constitute memory and has enlivened the account with illustrative examples from 40 well-chosen films. It is a polished performance, aimed at a general readership.

The modern marriage of memory science and movies was launched by Christopher Nolan’s film, *Memento* (2000), an account of a man with severe anterograde amnesia. The film is a complex, neo-noir puzzle told backwards and forwards simultaneously. It is about murder, memory, grief, revenge, and identity, and conveys the disorientation that Leonard, the disabled protagonist, is experiencing. Rejected as too complicated by the major film distributors, *Memento* found its own audience in art house cinemas around the world, earning cult status and commercial success. Few films have provoked so much discussion and dissection by critics, film buffs, and neuroscientists, who tried to solve the puzzle of what actually happened.

Seamon, a psychology professor at Wesleyan University, was inspired by all this to try an experiment. He asked students in his memory class to watch *Memento* and then write an essay describing what the filmmaker got right and wrong. The experiment was a great success; his students “responded enthusiastically and said they saw the film in a new light.”

Something should be said about this “new light.” Based on 20 years of experience using films in law school classes to explore the nexus of psychology and morality, I offer a possible explanation: Film is the medium of young adults and they feel confident about their judgments and opinions. Furthermore, by inviting his students to critique the film, he transformed what is ordinarily a passive mind set—entertain me—into an active mind set of intellectual engagement. Like all good teachers, he empowered his students. Out of this experiment came a successful course in memory and the movies, and this highly readable book.

Seamon’s book is subtitled, “What Films Can Teach Us about Memory.” This seems a dubious claim. Films by themselves have taught us very little about memory. In fact, as Seamon emphasizes, filmmakers for most the 20th century were misrepresenting amnesia as a plot device. Typically a bump on the head would lead to retrograde amnesia characterized by loss of identity. This would
be cured by another fortuitous bump. As Hollywood came under Freud’s influence, the physical bump on the head was replaced by psychological trauma.

Even the *Memento* craze did not deter Hollywood from relying on the traditional plot device of retrograde amnesia with loss of personal identity. In 2002 came *The Bourne Identity*, about an amnestic Central Intelligence Agency assassin; it had three sequels, and together the *Bourne* movies grossed over a billion dollars worldwide. Seamon, in his concluding chapter, asks: “Why is amnesia so often misrepresented in film?” Perhaps because fiction is more profitable. And although they misrepresent how the mind-brain remembers, these films touch on the mystery of the self that still challenges science and philosophy.

Seamon begins his book with a discussion of the romantic comedy, *50 First Dates*, starring Drew Barrymore as Lucy. Lucy’s memory is impaired after a car crash. She can remember her past and each day as it unfolds, but cannot retain the new memory—hence the 50 first dates. Of course this kind of amnesia, a great plot device for a comedy, conforms to nothing we know about how memory actually works. Seamon then recounts the case history of a woman, a superfan of Drew Barrymore, who a year after *50 First Dates* had an automobile accident and supposedly developed the same kind of amnesia on a functional/psychological basis. What should we make of this apparent amnesia by identification?

Seamon provides no answer about this particular case, and says little throughout the book about functional impairments of memory. His equivocal “take home message” from this life-imitates-art example “is not that movies are an inherently misleading way to learn about memory. ...[we must]...let our viewing be guided by scientific knowledge.” In other words, without Seamon’s guidance, films would teach us precious little. What he proceeds to do in the book is to use films as specimens which he summarizes and dissects with scientific expertise, demonstrating what they get right and what they get wrong.

Along the way, in concise chapters (each begins with “setting the scene” and ends with a “fadeout”), he illustrates the science of memory: working memory, lasting memory, recognizing
faces, autobiographical memories, persistent traumatic memories, the reality of amnesia, senior moments and Alzheimer’s disease. Considering that this is a popular book, Seamon has been scrupulous in citing the literature for every statement he makes.

Particularly impressive is the way he navigates the treacherous waters in the chapter “When Troubling Memories Persist.” Clint Eastwood’s Mystic River and Jarecki’s documentary, Capturing the Friedmans, are featured in his discussion of childhood sexual abuse and the phenomenon of recovered memories. Clinicians who are still fighting the “memory wars” and the reality of “Freudian repression” will find Seamon both objective and informative.

Not that he gets everything right in this book. In his otherwise excellent chapter on the “reality of amnesia,” he briefly comments on electro-convulsive therapy (ECT), once a controversial treatment for depression. ECT is now widely accepted by clinicians as highly efficacious when antidepressant medications fail. Seamon misleadingly presents it as a stop-gap measure that causes patients “to forget troublesome issues.”

One of the problems in a book about film is that readers who are moviegoers can be fanatically indignant about spoilers. Seamon seems blissfully unaware of the issue as he neatly summarizes the plots of his films. Cinephiles might also find fault with summaries that, by emphasizing the theme of memory, seem to miss the real meaning of the film. For example, in Seamon’s summary of the award-winning Life of Pi, he briefly describes the two interpretations of what happened on the life raft after the shipwreck, omitting any mention of the film’s deeper meaning as an exploration of faith.

But these are quibbles. Seamon has produced, directed, written, and narrated a book that will educate as it entertains. It might even empower its readers.

Seamon also plans a free online course on the book.
Bio

Alan A. Stone, M.D., is the Touroff-Glueck Professor of Law and Psychiatry in the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Medicine, Harvard University. He has been a Guggenheim Fellow, a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences, and the Tanner Lecturer at Stanford University. At Harvard, he has been a fellow of the Mind Brain and Behavior Interfaculty. He has also served as President of the American Psychiatric Association. Stone is a graduate of Harvard University (1950) and Yale Medical School (1955), is the author of several books, and reviews films for the Boston Review.