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### Madness

There exists a common though provoking saying that goes, “Perception is Reality”. What we see is what we believe to be true. This concept of thought and reality explains how we see things and assess our place in our lives. Should a person live in the mountains all their life, excluded from modern civilization, all that they will know is what the mountains are, nothing more. Introduce that person to a massive metropolis like New York City for the first time and they will believe that they have wound up on some foreign alien planet far away. The overwhelming atmosphere of such an event would most likely drive that person mad. The same applies with convincing a person of something. If you tell a person something enough times, eventually, they will come to believe it as true. Majority rules and mob mentality. Terry Gilliam’s *12 Monkeys* explores this well through his protagonist, James Cole. Cole is constantly at war with himself trying to figure out his own mind which others believe to be riddled with madness as he embarks on a quest that he is tasked with to save humanity. Cole, although plagued with a certain dystopian sickness, is shown in the movie to be mentally manipulated by other characters in the film but can be seen as to be mentally sane as he progresses through his quest, leaving convincing evidence.

Cole lives in the year 2035 where a fatal virus has wiped out most of the human population and the rest of living society is forced to take to the underground to stay alive. The world’s leading scientists give him a task to travel back in time to 1996, the time when the virus

first spread to gather information so that they scientists of the present time may analyze the virus and produce a cure for it. The first thing he does, when accidentally sent back to the year 1990, rather than 1996, is tell the humans he encounters at the time that he is from the future and knows of an apocalyptic event that is about to occur. Naturally, the people alive at the time label him as mentally ill, as they would do with conspiracy theorists, since they are unable to fathom such a feat taking place such as time travel or a worldwide apocalyptic extinction event. The film shows us the future in the beginning sciences where Cole is suited up in an industrial hazmat suit that allows him to explore the surface safely, although uncomfortably, so he may collect samples for the scientists to analyze. The scientists are shown as they question Cole about the mission that they have planned for him. These scenes are important as they give us a clear picture that Cole is indeed from the future however Cole will begin to doubt these events as true later on. A mental patient explains to Cole in the hospital that he is mentally divergent and is aware of this, trying to heal his own mental instability. Cole does not forget this interaction.

Assigned to Cole for mental rehabilitation, Dr. Kathryn Raily was interested in what Cole had to say in 1990, as her goal was to help him through his presumed insanity. She slightly encourages him to play out his thoughts as she grants him the phone call that he begs for only to find out that the phone call doesn't produce the output expected since Cole was sent to the wrong year. Again, not a convincing enough story for Cole. Fortunately, the scientists of the future, or in this movie, the present, pull him back while he is sedated and bound to a table which convince the mental doctors that he is some Houdini style master escape artists and also helps to reassure the audience that there is a 2035 that Cole belongs to. We still, at this point do not know if Cole is just imagining all of the 2035 events as his perception of reality through his potentially mentally warped mind.

Realizing their mistake after being informed by Cole, the scientists send him back, this time for sure that they sent him to 1996. Of course he ends up in World War I briefly, where he is shot in the leg, before being propelled to 1996. Cole kidnaps the 1996 Dr. Raily who, coincidentally, just published a book involving the World War I incident featuring Cole (not to her knowledge). This event does not help his case of being mentally stable. Cole demands that Raily take him to Philadelphia to find the Army of the 12 Monkeys, the organization blamed for the virus that wiped out almost all of humanity. We begin to see during this adventure, especially once he reaches Philadelphia, Cole finds the things that he is looking for but they are not exactly as he expected them, and he begins to doubt his sanity and starts to believe that he made the whole thing about humanity's extinction up. As Cole begins to think this, Raily begins to piece together the things Cole has said and starts to believe his irrational story to be true.

There are many events that take place between Cole and Raily that start to rebuild our confidence in Cole and his mental stability. Cole's entire goal at first is to find the alleged Army of the 12 Monkeys so he may complete his mission. Raily, doubtful of their existence, does not believe them to be real. Cole rationalized their existence because, back in 1990, he explained his mission to a mental patient, Jeffery Goines, and named the organization he sought the Army of the 12 Monkeys. We find that, accidentally inspired by Cole, Jeffery goes to start that exact organization. During the kidnapping of Raily, Cole is fascinated by the music of the era and prefers to have the radio on in the car. As we know, radio stations often break music to play ads or talk about issues and in 1996 was no different. The radio plays a story where a little boy is trapped in a well and the rescuers are planning on how to get him out of the well. Cole tells Raily that the boy is playing a prank and is actually hidden in a barn. We later learn of this to be true and it shocks Raily as to how he knows the events of the future play out, especially trivial

ones like this boy's incident. Cole tries to rationalize his insanity by saying he saw it on TV but Raily doesn't buy it. She becomes doubtful that Cole is actually insane. In 2035, Cole is told by the scientist to make a phone call to a certain number, undisclosed to the audience, that they can intercept in 2035 as they have the recording of a distorted message taken from that number from 1996. While in Philadelphia, Raily reminds him of this number as she is superstitious in thinking Cole may be right in his claim. Doubtful since throughout the entire film he is being told he is insane; Cole doesn't want to make the call so Raily does it. Raily, after making the call at a nearby phone booth, comes back to Cole to tell him what she said but Cole goes to repeat the message verbatim as he realizes that the distorted message was Raily calling from that payphone. Raily is sure that Cole was not in plausible listening distance from the phone and is baffled yet curious how Cole knew her message word for word. All of this points to Cole actually being from the future and his claims being correct, justifying his sanity.

Perhaps the most influential piece of evidence that we have that Cole is actually not insane and the tragic calamity does actually occur is when Raily discovers that Cole has been shot and takes him to the woods to remove the bullet. She notices that the bullet seems quite old to have come out of a gun in 1996 so she has the bullet analyzed to put her mind at ease. To her shock, the bullet is confirmed to be an antique from World War I, an impossible feat unless the victim could have been in World War I. She knows that Cole is nowhere near old enough to have actively participated in World War I and therefore cannot believe that he would have actually been there, for it would mean that his claim to be a time traveler would be true. The revelation of this antique bullet also prompts Raily to dive back into her work and research on that particular era where she pulls out a picture used in her book from the very battle where Cole was shot and sees a naked Cole in the background of the photo. The only possible evidence for this photo

proof would be either she is insane as well as Cole or Cole is not insane and is telling the truth. This physical evidence is the only evidence in the film that is sound proof that Cole is a time traveler and must be sane and correct in his claims. The film does not even explore the possibility of the bullet being fired from a replica or antique weapon in 1996 because this is not what happened. The audience is shown a vivid scene where Cole is shot in World War I and he was not hallucinating, dreaming or having a mental breakdown.

Throughout the film, starting with the first scene, we are shown dream that Cole has from his childhood of a shooting in the airport. We later learn that this scene was himself watching he and Raily make an escape for Key West as they are both wanted fugitives from the law since now they are both believed to be mentally insane since Raily now, due to the heavy evidence, believes Cole's story about the deadly virus. Each time the dream is shown, it is a little different than the last as pieces of the puzzle fall together. In one dream, we see a Jeffrey Goines carrying briefcase with what is suspected to be the virus speculated about. We learn that Jeffrey, while he is the founder and leader of the Army of the 12 Monkeys, is not the spreader of the virus. The dream expands to show us Raily with blonde hair screaming in emotional pain and eventually a red-haired man in a yellow jacket holding the suspicious briefcase. When Cole and Raily, dressed in disguises, at the end of the film, attempt to make their escape through the airport we watch these events unfold. We see the red haired man who is identified as a Dr. Peters, an associate of Jeffrey and his father, we see the blonde haired Raily because of her disguise and we see the man who got shot is Cole in disguise, which is why he was not identifiable in the dream. After Cole's shooting and death, Raily turns to see a child Cole, just like explained to her by Cole as he remembers the dream from his childhood. Seeing the child Cole in this scene verifies to the audience that these events did happen, Cole did witness them

once, and is not making the dream up. The progressions of the dream, as they get more and more like the actual scene, show the path of Cole's mind piecing things together showing us that, while he may be perceiving himself to be insane, he is subconsciously correct and not insane.

Cole and Raily during their adventure together develop in opposite parallels. Cole, riddled by society constantly telling him that he is mentally insane and the events of 1996 not going as initially thought lead him to believe that he is actually insane and may be making the whole catastrophe up. Raily on the other hand slowly starts to see the clear evidence of Cole's time traveling and starts to believe him. She however, does not dismiss the fact that she could be going insane herself, since the initial consensus between her and the other doctors was that Cole was mad. It becomes evident, fortunately, to Raily that she and Cole are not insane in the airport when she sees the man with the virus briefcase. The fact of the matter is, despite Cole and Raily being mad or not has no effect on the outcome of the movie. The audience knows that Cole is sane through strong supporting evidence throughout the film so we know the events to be true. Cole travels back in time but due to the nature of fate, cannot stop the events that lead to the near extinction of humanity from occurring. The scientists know this and they have no intention of saving the past world and are only looking to make a cure for the virus in 2035. Cole knows this as well which is why he and Raily plan the escape to Key West. The audience is presented evidence of this when Cole attempts to shoot Dr. Peters to save humanity but is stopped by the authorities and is shot and killed himself. We learn from this film that fate is set and there is no changing how history will unfold. Regardless of the meddling done, the events will play out as there are determined and that is simply that. Cole may have been proven to be sane mentally but no matter his efforts, fate will remain the same. We as humans living our own destinies must be aware of this and simply live out our fates as destined.

Works Cited

Gilliam, Terry, director. *12 Monkeys*. Universal Pictures, 1995.