Tyler Sulsenti

Professor Steinmann

HPL 447

2 July 2018

The Uncanny in *12 Monkeys*

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. Sigmund Freud believed this to be part of the uncanny, which would be an awareness of an earlier stage in life where one is not in control, since at times it can be difficult to disguise between what is reality and what is not. 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 is the movie to be mentally manipulated by other characters in the film and begins to struggle with the uncanny, as he finds it difficult to distrust between what is reality and what is not.

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 Railly 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. Railly 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 Railly 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, which causes Cole to doubt his reality. He begins here to believe that his entire life in 2035 is not real and loses the understanding of his origin. His thoughts plague him as he cannot tell if they are real or not. As Cole begins to think this, Railly begins to piece together the things Cole has said and starts to believe his irrational story to be true. Again, this even causes Railly to loose he perception of reality because previously to her, thoughts of time travel were preposterous and completely unrealistic. Now that she is starting to see clear evidence, she begins also to have trouble distinguishing between what she thinks is real and what is actually real.

There are many events that take place between Cole and Railly 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. Railly, 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 kidnaping of Railly, 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 Railly 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 Railly 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 and reality by saying he saw it on TV but Railly 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 form that number from 1996. While in Philadelphia, Railly 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 Railly does it. Railly, 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 Railly calling from that payphone. Railly 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, and to us, what is real. Unfortunately for Cole, he still cannot tell the difference between the reality of things and his own thoughts of what is real.

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 Railly 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 Railly to dive back into her work and research on that particular era where she pulls out a picture used in her book form 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 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, mixing his thoughts with reality.

Freud defines the uncanny as the awareness of an earlier stage in development in our life in which we are not in control or because we cannot yet distinguish between our thoughts and reality. It is obvious that Cole experiences this as he is in constant reembrace of his duties in 2035 and the task he has been given to complete in 1996 but yet develops a trouble in believing what is real. Cole is very obviously not in control of his life as he is imprisoned and used by the scientists in 2035 and almost similarly, trapped in a mental hospital in 1990. His entire existence in 1996 was to fulfill the scientists wishes. With such little control, and so many people telling him what to do and what is real, Cole has much trouble realizing what is real and who is right and who is actually just insane. So much so that he even doubts his own sanity. The uncanny will make a person do this as fear of the unknown can drive a person mad. The unknown can simply be anything. In Cole’s case, the unknown was his own mind. He simply could not tell what was real anymore and it drove him crazy and he almost let his own mission go. But the unknown, while it makes us fear, also draws us in. Horror films and thrillers often are high in popularity because people seem to enjoy to freak out about things that cannot be explained. For example, Railly’s obsessive thoughts about Cole and time traveling as she starts to believe him. The unknown drives us to learn more or explore more and experience more whether it be though research, film or our own minds and thoughts. One can only hope that they will be able to distinguish reality from thoughts and what is not real.