

How do we begin to understand the multiple ambiguities which constitute this film? There is a clue toward the end, when the protagonist, Cole, slips in the following insight, as he watches a scene from the Hitchcock film, "Vertigo". He says to Catherine, his partner in the exploration of reality:

The movie... I think it's just like what's happening with us. Like the past. The movie never changes. But every time you *see* it, it changes. It *seems* different, because *you're* different. You see different things.

In other words, the past may not change, but our view of it is always susceptible to change. This is our view of the function of psychoanalysis -- to change what we know in one way by reviewing our memories of it. The passage of time allows us to change the perception of our experience which ultimately changes us.

As first-time viewers of "12 Monkeys", we also experience vertigo and confusion, because we are thrust helplessly back and forth between different moments in time, moments which are woven seamlessly together as if they were a single hallucinatory dream sequence which denies the very existence of time. The device of time travel is used as the 4th dimension corresponding to the dream reality of timelessness. Of course, for first-time viewers, the teasing question is always there before us: Are we indeed dealing with future time travel -- a seemingly unrealizable concept outside of the imagination, or are we witnessing the visualized delusions of a paranoid schizophrenic? Who tells the truth -- Cole, the "alleged" time traveller? Or Goines, the spouter of garbled end-of-the-world fantasies? Or Katherine, the rational

psychiatrist? Does Cole inhabit the world of the future or is he Goines' fantasy? Or is it the reverse -- is Goines Cole's fantasy? And does the psychiatrist, Katherine Reilly, *really* know the difference between what is fantasy and what is real?

The film explores the theme of loss and attempted recovery via modern electronic simulation technology. The marvel of technology is that it saves time, recaptures time, freezes time, scrambles time and space, and virtually transforms our psychological perception of time-bound reality. The only way to grasp the meaning of the film is to replay it many times, with each replay offering us more explanatory detail that we missed the time before. Each replay seems to represent yet another encounter with the human unconscious, as we play it out in each session of psychoanalysis. This theme has been taken up before in the film "Groundhog Day". It is the play in the present which fleshes out the mysterious boundaries of past experience. The play repeats what we could not change in the past; yet the creativity of play adds a dimension of change, and changes our perception of what we could not change. Only thus can we change the future through new behaviors based on changed understanding of the past.

The human unconscious is a time loop which never ends. Only death can end time. The end of a millenium may represent death for all of us psychologically because humans tend not to live much beyond a hundred years at the most. The numeric passage of 1999 to 2000 is so alien to our experiential scale of time passage that it may well trigger death anxiety, particularly in paranoid individuals who use external events to represent their inner lives. Thus, the paranoid schizophrenic is often seen and heard -- in the film as in real life -- to warn of the end of the world.

The electronic equivalent of the end of the world has already touched us as the dilemma of our computer systems' incapacity to process the change from the years 1999 to 2000. Unless we find a solution, all our computers will "crash" at midnight, December 31st, 1999, and will end our worldwide dependency on computer technology as well as the world as we know it.

As Cole pursues the Army of the 12 Monkeys and Goines as its creator and representative, the film seems to be endorsing the notion that the paranoid schizophrenic, whose diaries foretell the end of the world through a poisonous viral epidemic unleashed by a madman, is Goines himself. The unfolding of the film gives us several false clues which lead us in this direction. The first is the film's prologue which announces the theme of the movie -- the millenium as the end of the world -- and how an *unnamed* paranoid schizophrenic warns us of this. When Cole meets Goines for the second time at his father's house in 1996, Goines tells him that he got the idea of wiping out the human race with a virus from Cole himself in 1990 when they were in the mental institution together. Here we are led to wonder if Cole, in seeking to stop the perpetrator of world destruction, ironically served as the catalyst or muse for the original idea.

What does "Twelve Monkeys" mean? Here, too, we get several overlapping hints. It is the name of Goines' ideological army and we believe throughout much of the film that this group is responsible for the end of the world. But they turn out to be simply a relatively harmless group who are dedicated to freeing wild animals from their human captors. Unconsciously, Goines may be motivated to free the monkeys used in his father's experiments with deadly viruses, as the monkeys may represent

Goines himself, entrapped in his psychosis through his father's doing. To monkey is to ape, and imitation of reality in the past is the goal of time travel. Identifying the true perpetrator of "Doomsday" is the "monkey on the film's back", and up until the end we do not know who this perpetrator really is. The future wants to know the truth about the past. Everyone claims they cannot "monkey with" the past, but they *are* trying to "throw a monkey wrench" into the fate of the future by investigating the past. And the number twelve evokes the numbers on the face of a clock. Back to time -- again. And the twelfth hour is metaphorically considered as the last moment before a great change. Is this change the end of the world? Or human death which virtually means the end of the world for each human? Or the end of our dependency on computer technology by the year 2000?

Of course, we are reminded yet again that we cannot interfere with fate or unconscious motivation, and that our very efforts to do so will somehow contribute to bring out that very fate we seek to avoid. The myth of Oedipus illustrates just this principle of the power of the unconscious to realize its aims despite conscious efforts to the contrary. As George Santayana said, we are condemned to repeat what we cannot remember.

The authority of the scientist adds weight to the spoutings of the madman. Thus, Dr. Katherine Reilly has written a book called *The Doomsday Syndrome*, which offers provocative evidence of a historical thread which regularly predicts the same end-of-the-world theory. We get the feeling that she, too, was inspired by Cole's doomsday prophecies in 1990 to explore a psychological phenomenon called The Cassandra Complex. In the Greek myth, as Katherine explains, Cassandra had the gift

of knowing the future but the curse of being disbelieved when she told others about it; hence, she suffered from "the agony of foreknowledge combined with the impotence to do anything about it." This psychological torture is suffered by Cole in those moments when he believes he knows the future but is disbelieved by those in the past. It is a torture to which we are unable to succumb in the present, as technology has not yet discovered any means to explore the dimension of time other than through imaginary simulation techniques. Impotent foreknowledge is a psychological syndrome of the mythological past and the imagined future. And yet, humans possess the impotent foreknowledge of their impending deaths, though not the moment of that death. As Cole says, "I don't think the human mind is meant to exist in two dimensions. It's just too stressful... It's very confusing. You don't know what's real or not." Even Katherine succumbs to confusion once she acquires concrete proof of Cole's time travels. She seems to take over the role of the seer from Cole. As my son Zachary pointed out to me, Katherine becomes more disturbed as Cole seems to become more sane -- by our psychiatric standards of 1996! She claims to be losing her faith in psychiatry and perhaps even in what she knows of reality. Cole, on the other hand, seems to adapt to the 1996 definition of reality by proclaiming to his captors in the future: "You're not real. You're in my mind. I am insane and you are my insanity."

As curious and intelligent human beings, we seek answers and closure to the ambiguity, mystery and confusion into which this film catapults us. We could easily fall into the insanity which does not know which image in the infinitely repetitive funhouse Hall of Mirrors is the real one. Which is more real -- the figure or the

ground? Each may need the other to exist simultaneously, but one human being cannot perceive both simultaneously. Is the imprisoned Cole a psychotic who is being "tortured" by imaginary captors? The murder or murders for which he was imprisoned are left unnamed; yet, we witness his murderous violence when he goes back to the past. Was it for these murders that he got imprisoned back in the future? Our minds boggle precariously as we consider the future in the past tense. We react like the computer trying to locate the year 2000.

Is Cole living in an endless time loop connecting his dying self to his 10-year-old self which witnesses his future death? Cole never forgets the hallucinatory scene which returns endlessly to haunt him as a nightmare. This scene constitutes the opening and closing visual sequences of the film. Only at the end do we realize that the dying man with the long hair and mustache is Cole. As he watches the film, "Vertigo", with Katherine, she is disguising him with the false hair, and as we identify his transformed visual self with the repetitive dream image, we ourselves suffer the vertigo of recognition, knowing he is about to meet his own death. But it is only when Cole gets to the airport with Katherine, that he himself identifies, for us and for himself for the first time, the little boy of his "nightmare", when he says: "It's my dream. But I was here. As a kid. About a week or two before everyone started dying." It was the adult's dream, but it was also the child's reality. The child watched an adult die at the airport, and a week or two later, everyone else started dying in that child's life. Did his own parents die? If so, then his repetitive dream could be viewed as a representation of an oedipal wish becoming reality. The adult man/father dies, leaving behind the adult woman/mother whose newly-lost eyes seek out the boy-

child in anticipated availability.

How does time link the dream and reality? According to one of 27 definitions in Webster's Dictionary (not to mention innumerable metaphors employing the word), time represents the entire period of existence of the world or of humanity. If time ends for an individual, his life ends. If time ends for the world, then all of humanity ends. Another definition of time is: "any one of a series of moments at which the same or nearly the same thing recurs". Recurring moments can be found in the dream, in unconscious repetition compulsion, in the fantasy of time travel, in the visual simulation of both the dream and time travel, and finally, in our technological capacity to film, rewind and replay film sequences. And yet paradoxically, while the dream is unreal and deathly to the extent that it denies the existence of time, it also represents the apex of human liveliness and dynamic creativity.

On the other hand, the nadir of human liveliness is achieved by the denial of inner life, such as is obtained by the alcoholic or drug addict. An alcoholic described to me the intolerable feeling of inner numbing as the feeling of "time slowing down." In other words -- inner death. We can now understand the words of the poet recited by a lecturer in the film:

*Yesterday this day's madness did prepare;*

*Tomorrow's silence, triumph, or despair:*

*Drink! For you know not whence you came, nor why:*

*Drink! For you know not why you go, nor where.*

The poet is Omar Khayyam, and the poem is the 74th verse of the *Rubaiyat*, which explores motivations for drinking. Existential alienation is a primary motivator for

drinking, an alienation which may be experienced subjectively as "time slowing down" within the time traveller and the paranoid schizophrenic, and induced virtually in the film viewer.

In the end, Cole fails to witness the moment in which the deadly virus is unleashed on the world. But just before he dies, he meets another time traveller from the future, the same one he met on the battlefield in World War I. He is also searching for the moment when the world ends. He tells Cole that they will keep sending people back in time until they discover the moment marking the end of the world. On the plane, the alleged perpetrator is seated beside a woman who is one of the head time researchers from the future. Obviously, she is getting closer to the moment of truth.

But the film ends here. This last sequence of truth seekers from the future cannot end with the knowledge of what happened at the moment when everyone died. That time traveller would die before returning to the future. Or carry the virus back with him. Then the survivors of the first holocaust would die in a second one and the human race would become extinct. And so the film's ending remains asymptotic of the discovery of death. We can get closer and closer to complete knowledge but if our intolerance of ignorance were to apprehend death, it would destroy us.

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#### **ADDENDUM: A Dream Interpretation**

In the end, which is also the beginning again, Katherine smiles at the small child as she turns away from the dying Cole. She has looked away from the dead, unseeing eyes to recapture those same eyes in the young vibrant boy. She smiles

inexplicably, yet it is the smile of recognition, because she has unconsciously recaptured a lost visual connection. The boy will still grow up and she will meet him again in yet another replay in the future. Perhaps this was the moment in Cole's life-time loop in which he, as a 10-year-old, first fell in love with Katherine and she with him. The two adults tell each other a number of times throughout the movie that they know each other, that they have seen each other before. But the earlier meeting, from his perspective, was between the small boy and the woman in the blonde wig. Two pairs of eyes met and connected for life. One can even imagine the boy growing up, haunted by that woman's dream-smile as it appears to him again and again in his sleeping life as well as in his repeated trips to the past. The young boy's eyes and the woman's smile are recognizable to us as the universal moment of oedipal love which gets embedded in the timelessness of the unconscious, only to surface in the adult when another woman's smile resembles, for some reason, that of his young mother.

**"TWELVE MONKEYS"**

A film by Terry Gilliam (1995)

Reviewed by

Rosemarie Krausz, Ph.D.

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