

1984: Down the Memory Hole

The greatest hazard of all – losing one’s self – can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss – an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. – is sure to be noticed.

Søren Kirkegaard

Some read Kirkegaard’s words and think, “Naaahhh...it couldn’t be that easy.”

It could.

We perceive ourselves in very specific ways. Round up those perceptions, toss them together, and you have an identity.

We also tend to form those perceptions in deeply personal ways. Oftentimes, we rely on memories and experiences to help us shape ourselves. They’re the things that tell us who we’ve been so we can better understand who we are. We trust that we understand ourselves because we trust our minds. We rarely fear we’ve gone insane, or that our perceptions and memories are simply off.

But have you ever wondered whether you should trust your memories?

Winston muses silently about the “mutable” nature of the past – a past the party destroys and constructs with fanatical devotion. Specifically, he wonders whether one can trust what one believes to be true when no physical records exist to verify a memory. Your recollections fade over time, and without that verification – the reminder of a touch, the recurrence of an event, a story told to you again – they simply vanish.

Really, close your eyes. How well can you picture your mother or father? Pretty well, but not as well as you might think – unless you can tell me how each hold his/her hands, how he/she stands, or how his/her face looks while laughing. Now how well can you remember your ninth-grade English teacher? Your sixth-grade math teacher? Your kindergarten teacher? Can you remember more than simply how they looked?

Now let’s think about your first experiences. Can you remember exactly how you felt when you first learned to swim? Can you remember how you felt when you read your first word? Can you smell something and be instantly transported back to your family’s kitchen, or remember the sensation of a dog’s fur the first time you rubbed it behind its ears? Can you remember your first dance, first kiss, first break-up, first success, first failure, first loss, first fear?

Robin Williams starred in a fascinating (if flawed) movie about a decade ago called “What Dreams May Come.” Most of you won’t be familiar with that one unless you watched it last semester, but it’s worth seeing for the visuals alone. The gist of it is that Williams’s character reawakens after death to find an afterlife based on the art his wife created; when he walks across the terrain, it smears into paint beneath his feet. Eventually, however, this bright and happy paradise is shattered when he realizes his grieving wife has committed suicide, and therefore banished herself to a version of Hell/Purgatory in which she withdraws from everything. Williams has to fight not just to reach her, but to force her to remember him somehow – with no way to prove he ever mattered to her.

Hugh Jackman starred in a fascinating (if flawed) movie a few years ago called “The Fountain.” The narrative fractures into three different storylines in three different time periods – the 1400s, the present, and the far-flung future. In each of them, a person who appears to be the same man in each drives himself to do something to save his endangered lover (who appears to be the same woman in each storyline, naturally). While the “future” storyline is of particular interest – where the future Jackman tries desperately to reach a place far off in the cosmos where the cure he needs to resurrect his lover is located – it’s most interesting because the protagonist struggles to remember why he’s going there in the first place, and wars with the urge to banish the only memories of her he’s been able keep because they’re too painful. We’re not certain whether he’s mourning her loss or his own guilt over not having been able to do more – whether he’s mourning the present or a past that isn’t even really his.

Similarly, Jim Carrey starred in a film a few years ago called “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.” In that film, a heart-broken and recently-dumped Carrey hires a company to erase all traces of his former relationship from his existence – even going so far as to allow them to alter and erase his memories. But as the more recent, pain-filled recollections give way to moments in the past where he was truly happy, he remembers why his lover was worth pursuing, even if it caused him heartbreak in the end – and must then struggle against the forces he hired to erase those happy moments.

I was mesmerized by the way all three films played with the relationship between memory, identity, and love. (It’s a relationship we’ll explore in *1984* in great detail, as well as in works later in the course.)

However, the reason I bring up film is because it’s a deeply visual medium – but a sensory one as well. Think about it: A blockbuster’s not the same if you can’t feel the bass rumbling the soles of your feet, hear the sound mix as it overwhelms you, feel the jolt of adrenaline when something jumps out at you, and so on. We tend to reduce our memories to the purely visual when they’re really far more than that – just as movies are far more than visual creations.

With that in mind, I want you to make me a landscape of your memories, just as Carrey, Jackman, and Williams did in their films. This assignment revolves around the three questions that inform *1984*’s narrative most (although you can skip the fourth, more sinister one – “What do you wish you could forget, or wish you didn’t know?”):

- What do you remember that defines you?
- What do you wish you could remember that’s slipping away or already forgotten outright?
- What are you most terrified you’ll forget?

Choose at least three colors – your favorite for your memories that you’d like to “take to the grave” with you, and one for each of the other questions. Turn your paper until it’s horizontally oriented, then make three columns with the words “Define Me,” “Slipping Away,” and “Don’t Forget Me” at the top of the paper (write your name on the back). Then start charting memories.

The project isn’t going up on the wall, and I’m the only one who sees it, so – provided, of course, that your content is school-appropriate – you have a lot of latitude with respect to how your design takes shape and what you decide to include. The only requirement that truly matters: you need to keep your memories grouped in the three categories I listed above. Many will opt out of the strict three-column design, adding drawings, forms, and shapes that enhance the meaning of your write-ups. Some of your memories will merit extensive, detailed explanations; others will be more self-evident; still others will even be best served by visuals alone. (You want to honor Marcel Proust’s work on *In Search of Lost Time*, but remember that it took him a lifetime to write it...and that he died when he finished.)

Whatever you choose to do, you should ultimately produce a colorful work of art chock-full of the recollections that mean the most to you. Remember, many of your memories will be about the things you saw or did. Those are important *if they are what you’d truly miss*. Don’t forget the little things you’d miss as well – the feeling of speeding for the first time, the sound of your dog bounding towards the door that you feel just a little guilty for taking for granted, the pressure of strawberry seeds between your teeth after you bite into the first fruit of the year. Life is wonderful and colorful, and you don’t want to forget something meaningful!

If everything else but your memory were taken, what would you want to remember?

Ultimately, the answers to these questions might surprise you a bit; at the very least, they’ll help you understand yourself a little better.

At the end, remember Kirkegaard’s unspoken message: Hold on tightly to what you’ve seen, what you’ve done, what you know – so no one can ever take your self from you.