

Movies and the Memory Police

By Harry Mackin

Spoilers for Yoko Ogawa's The Memory Police

In school, we learned that movie theaters first became popular during the Great Depression because the movies provided an escape from the bleak realities through which contemporary audiences were living. I was always suspicious about the notion of pure escapism, however,, because movies and other stories have never really worked that way for me. No matter what I watch, some aspect of it invariably gets me thinking about something I brought into the theater with me. Sometimes this is a passing feeling that's easy to ignore. Usually it isn't.

Now that I can't go to movie theaters, I'm actually reading again. One of the books I've read in quarantine is Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police*. Oddly enough, it seems to be a book about what it's like when you can't go to your favorite movie theater. Well... kind of. *The Memory Police* takes place on an island where objects disappear along with people's memories of them. The fascistic "memory police" enforce this memory loss by coercing inhabitants to destroy all evidence of any disappearing object's existence. If anyone is unable to forget, the memory police make *them* disappear, too. Without her memories to help her process what she's losing, the protagonist can only conceive of her losses as "holes" growing in her heart. As she loses the things and people that make her who she is, she begins to lose herself as well.

Obviously, the pandemic hasn't stripped us of our memories... yet. But when all my memories of the past year largely involve sitting in my studio apartment day after day anyway, the difference between what happened on the island and what's happening to me starts to feel academic. Particularly in terms of what it's doing to how I feel and what I think about. It's all too easy to feel the same kind of "holes" that grew in the protagonist's heart growing in mine, too. Maybe it's because memories and feelings can be so hard to understand until they're threatened. Before March, I used to go to the Trylon around three times per week. But I didn't fully appreciate how important the Trylon had become to my life until I couldn't go any more.

Of course, I knew I would miss the Trylon. What I didn't know was how much losing the Trylon would affect virtually every other aspect of my life. Losing my ability to attend regular Trylon screenings has noticeably affected my every day thoughts and feelings. I feel different. I spend my days thinking different thoughts, having different conversations, and even watching movies and reading books differently.. The longer this goes on, the more these new patterns start to replace the old ones. It's no real exaggeration to say that losing the Trylon has meant losing some piece of myself. As the protagonist of *The Memory Police* learns, a life is composed of a collection of thoughts, feelings, and memories connected to places and people. All of these thoughts, feelings, and memories touch and support one another. When those supports are threatened, the whole structure shakes.

Appropriately, the way I notice the loss of the Trylon the most has to do with my memory. Without realizing it, I had begun to use the Trylon as a means of marking and processing the passage of time. I don't usually remember when I watch a movie, and I *certainly* don't remember everything I do at work every day. But before all this, I always remembered when I saw something at the Trylon. My friend and fellow podcaster Cody goes so far as to save and date all of his Trylon ticket stubs to help him remember his experiences. So much of creating our lives is about choosing what to remember. We are who and what we choose to remember—whether we realize it or not.

When we talk about repertory cinema, we talk about preservation. Both the films shown and the overall community experience of independent movie theaters are worth preserving, and repertory cinemas do that. But theaters like the Trylon do more than that, too. They provide a place where we can make memories for ourselves, a place where we can reassert what we want to remember. In my favorite memories of the Trylon, I'm often struggling with alienating feelings of depression or despair as I walk up to the door. By the time I go in, sit down, and prepare for the movie to start, I swear I can *feel* myself coming back to life—like I'm remembering who I am.

Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* demonstrates how our lives are held up by delicate, interlinking supports of thoughts, habits, vocations, and memories. The memory police as entropy, loss, or time itself will erode those supports until they break away. Movies, podcasts, and especially places like the Trylon can all give us the means to build and rebuild them again, together. The Trylon doesn't just preserve movies or movie theaters. It helps preserve us.