American Psychological Society
Building a science-first foundation for psychology.
Observer
August 2005
Volume 18, Number 8

Silver Screen Psychology

A distraught father sorts through mementos of his missing daughter, replaying in memory the last conversation he had with her before her disappearance. But gradually his memories change, and we no longer know what is real and what is imagined. If it sounds more like the premise of a Hollywood film than a tool forteaching the psychological science of memory — then good, that's the whole point.

The short film, called *Retrieval*, which had its Los Angeles premiere at the APS 17th Annual Convention in May, is the creation of Xunesis, a Chicago- based studio that aims to devise what co-founder Robert Morrison called "innovative ways to do science education."

Retrieval: Nick Breckenridge works with photos to try and piece together his memory in *Retrieval*

In the film, the main character, Nick Breckenridge, successively recalls segments of his heated final argument with his daughter Amber — a conversation in which he commanded her not to go abroad — and his memory gradually transforms their interaction into something much different and less conflicted As Nick successively edits and reedits their encounter in his memory, he repeatedly utters the refrain, "How do you remember?" *Retrieval* and its companion learning module, which includes interviews with psychology's memory superstars Robert Bjork, Elizabeth Loftus, and Daniel Shacter, is designed to answer that question.

The film offers an innovative visual representation of how memory works in a room criss-crossed with clothes lines on which Nick Breckenridge hangs and continually rearranges photos, clippings, and other bits of memory flotsam, to capture the evolving nature of memory. According to Bjork, "We don't just replay [memory] the way a tape recorder would. We reconstruct it." In the teaching module, Loftus explains that Nick's gradually altered memory reflects a process of autosuggestion. Although the themes of the film are easily untangled in discussion after the fact, or when watching the learning module, its approach is still much more indirect and challenging than a standard lecture or textbook. "[Students] have to work for it a bit, which is good," Morrison said.

Morrison, who has a PhD in cognitive neuroscience from UCLA, sees *Retrieval* as a model for future projects on different psychological science topics. He plans to do a project on behavioral genetics, for example, and already is in production on a series of "virtual lab tours" that will expose students to the workings of a psychology lab.

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