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Memento and Its Angle on Trust, Memory, and Identity

Memento (Nolan, 2000) is an early entry in director Christopher Nolan's career, yet still sticks out in his filmography. The film follows Leonard (Guy Pearce), as he tries to find revenge for his wife's murder while dealing with short-term memory loss. Only being able to remember details of his life before the murder, every scene starts with a blank slate in his mind; to recreate this slate onto the audience, the film is told in reverse chronological order. *Memento* stands as a unique entry in the psychological puzzle film genre by interweaving its disorienting narrative structure with commentary that explores memory and identity's connection. The film challenges conventional storytelling and highlights memory to be unreliable, diving into the concept of memory being the foundation of a person's identity.

Before diving into the film, let's look at the genre it belongs to. Elliot Panek explains the puzzle genre well in his writing, "The Poet and the Detective: Defining the Psychological Puzzle Film", where he writes that films in this genre offer doubt in the viewer's mind, created by a general lack of clarity. This lack of clarity could be from "unusual story structure, violations of causal logic, or flaunted, unresolved gaps in the causal chain of the story." And these concepts are usually illustrated through a mentally unstable character or phenomena such as time travel (65). In comparison, classic Hollywood narration often follows omniscient techniques, giving the audience certainty of what they are following. *Memento*, as a puzzle film, follows those characteristics of an unusual story structure, as well as a main character with a condition that disrupts his mental state. But with that, it sticks out in its own ways through its unique order of

events, and a dark and truthful message to viewers. The entire film, I argue, is a commentary on how we deceive ourselves to justify poor actions of ours, lying to ourselves and over time changing our perception of what we truly have done; I will be looking at how the film and its narrative structure create this theme.

A large difference between *Memento* and other puzzle films is the alignment of doubt between the audience and protagonist. In *Inception* (Nolan, 2010), one twist is that Leonardo DiCaprio's character Cobb is actually responsible for his wife's death. This is a twist for the audience, but not for Cobb, as he withholds the information himself. The film also follows other characters at points; however, in *Memento*, there is not a single scene that Leonard is not involved in. Because of this, we are forced into his perspective and his only from the very beginning. Andrew Kania expands on this in his writing on the film: "While this technique has been used before, it is especially interesting in this case since it puts us, in a way, in the same epistemic situation as Leonard. During any scene we have as little to go on as he has. All we know is what is right there in the moment, including the notes about past events that are available. Leonard can't remember, and we're in the same boat since we haven't seen the past yet" (45). Let's look at some examples from the film that show how this impacts audience understanding of the themes displayed. The film contains no outside perspective, no information that the audience is allowed to gather that Leonard doesn't have. It opens with its chronological ending, the killing of Teddy (Joe Pantoliano), moving literally in reverse; this sets the audience up immediately for something out of the ordinary, setting the stage for them to prepare themselves for what follows. The opening scene follows with an introduction to a black and white timeline, this one moving forward chronologically. Because it is revealed later that this is all before the events we follow in color, we'll call this timeline 1. Now, there are details and lines

spoken that would simply just go in one ear and out the other for viewers, but on a second viewing, are much deeper than we'd think.

When a scene in timeline 1 occurs, the following scene in color (timeline 2) is connected, usually highlighting whatever it was Leonard spoke about. An example of this would be when he first introduces his system, and the following scene shows him use said system in order to regain his understanding of Teddy. Right away, there are hints here connecting to its overarching theme, as he trusts his note that reads "kill him", following it with no trouble at all (as we saw). He explains to Burt (Mark Boone Junior) that he knows everything about himself; the combination of lines like this and him following his notes makes the audience trust in him, as much as he trusts himself. The doubt never lies in his actions, but more in everything around them, and always from a physical standpoint: how did he **physically** get there, where did he **physically** come from, who set him up? These are the questions that are raised, never any along the lines of a motive or a reason. Hints like this are sprinkled all throughout the film, and the audience is manipulated to trust him and his memory, simply because he is the one we're following. Just like how Leonard easily does or does not trust people based on his notes, the audience easily trusts him. There are questions that should be asked, but due to the structure of the storytelling, are not. With his note on Teddy saying "don't believe his lies. Kill him", what has he lied about? Why do we assume not to trust him besides what Leonard's note says? Other things Leonard says contribute to this idea of easy trust, things along the lines of trusting your handwriting, the importance of where you place your notes, and how he tattoos vital pieces of information onto him. We buy into all of it. The reason for this is because of it being presented to us in reverse order. We know how it ends; our curiosity for how we got to that outcome outweighs any form of skepticism for Leonard. In their writing on editing, Todd Berliner and Dale J. Cohen covers that

“the brain perceives spatial coherence when observing classically edited cinema because the perceptual system evolved to accept imperfect and disjointed visual information, to reconstruct the fragmented information into a model of the physical world, and to ignore gaps and discontinuities” (59). *Memento* challenges this concept; as the film progresses and the story begins to unravel, the audience’s understanding is based on how much they remember previously, reflecting how memory and interpretation are tied together. Audiences may find it difficult ignoring gaps or reconstructing pieces together. Timeline 1 and 2 are interwoven, one occurring with a guarantee of the other to follow. This back and forth is disorienting, and with enough time passed in timeline 1, parts of timeline 2 could be forgotten by the time we return to it, and little details don’t get caught. This effect is mirrored by Leonard himself, specifically by his reasoning for not being good on the phone: after a while, he forgets who he’s talking to and what he said. This matches the audience, as after too long spent in one timeline, details about the last scene get missed; the primary focus is how that scene in timeline 2 ended and began. With something possibly forgotten, the viewer relies on the fragments from the previous scene that they remember, just like how Leonard relies on his tattoos or notes.

In Fran Pheasant-Kelly’s writing on Nolan, she briefly explores *Memento*: “The repetition of scenes and dialogue, the colour/monochrome binary and fragmented montages of rapidly edited sequences give the impression of dissociative traumatic memory and its related confusion. In addition, slower-paced cinematography and framing, such as the use of long shot, signify the protagonist's isolation whilst the unreliability of memory is made evident by the way that Shelby's apparently normal recollections are contradictory” (106). The style *Memento* was made in works as a representation of handling traumatic memory, placing the audience exactly in Leonard’s eyes to feel that confusion with him. In addition to the filmmaking elements, the

narrative in itself comments on handling trauma. As I stated before, the film is outright highlighting how we lie to ourselves to justify things that we've done in our past. Outside of some on-the-nose lines, such as: "So you lie to yourself to be happy. There's nothing wrong with that, we all do it. Who cares if there's a few little details you'd rather not remember?" (Teddy), Leonard's actions throughout the film feature him lying to himself or facing the impact of his lies on his actions/memory. When Teddy asks him how he got the suit or the car, he thinks it's from his wife's death: "we were well covered". The overall twist appears to be that Leonard actually killed his wife and has lied to himself about it. However, if Leonard doesn't remember that she was diabetic, it could just be an attempt of Teddy trying to manipulate him. It is revealed that Teddy has been using him for over a year, and that he is a corrupt cop, so who can be trusted? I argue that either way, the overall message stays the same. Whether his wife died in the accident or by Leonard's hands accidentally, the film's events start the same way: Leonard creates a lie for himself to follow as a rebuttal after everything Teddy said to him. It could be true, or it could be a lie, but the point is that Leonard **believed** it, and wants to forget it, so he creates this lie in order to point his focus elsewhere, knowing he'd forget the origins of it. "Can I just let myself forget what you've made me do?" This ending scene is one example of how Leonard may come to the realization that what he believes in is made up on his own end, but willingly chooses to live in a comfortable life of lies, as it is easier and more justifiable. Tying into the importance of its narrative structure, this scene being placed at the end will clearly stick the most with the viewer, nailing its themes down.

I want to focus on a detail that really heightens the concept of misinterpretation, and the domino effect of that on the identity. With that, let's look at Leonard's system of tattoos. Again, he tattoos facts on his body that he deems important; one important detail about them is that they

usually appear to be in covered places. They are meant for him to discover every time. But there is one tattoo that is on his hand, that he always catches himself looking at: remember Sammy Jankis.

This tattoo, in the way that Leonard uses it, serves as a reminder to not be like Sammy. This is explained when we are first introduced to it, as Leonard describes how he uses his system in order to operate, which Sammy couldn't do efficiently. But, there are some crossing lines between the two of them. Sammy, described to have the same condition as Leonard, wrote notes as reminders as well. The argument Leonard makes during the tale of Sammy is that Sammy's conditioning didn't work. Regardless of the repetition, Sammy never was able to catch on and instinctively remember anything. In the case of Leonard's actions, he uses this tattoo to remind himself to not be like Sammy, and to use "habit and routine" (as he narrates) in order to make his life possible. I think that this entire motive around the tattoo is a misinterpretation. His entire drive comes from this reminder, however I argue that his original motive for this stems from a different logic: he does not trust himself. He knows he sets himself up in very specific directions, but in each new moment, is oblivious to whatever the motive could have been for what he's written down. And, possibly after events similar to what occurs in this film, tattoos this on himself in order to remind himself that his system **is not efficient** either. So, instead of using this as a way to tell himself that his routine and habit isn't working, Leonard uses this as a motive to continue his path and trust his system, comparing it to a fogged memory of what Sammy did. Based on all the evidence in the film, it is safe to assume that Leonard has also manipulated a memory in his head that Sammy's system didn't work and that his is better. This tattoo, a crucial part of Leonard's identity and his understanding of himself, has over time become misinterpreted

by him. This plot thread is further commentary on memory forming the base of a person's identity.

There are hints that point to the fact that we shouldn't trust Leonard either, in the way that he clearly makes things out to be whatever he wants. One small but important example is when Teddy tells Leonard to not trust Natalie, and to write that on her polaroid. Remember, Leonard emphasizes to trust his handwriting. When he writes "do not trust her" on the picture for her, he purposefully writes it in different handwriting, crossing it out later after choosing to believe his other note about Teddy (don't believe his lies). The whole film in a way centers around this note on Teddy, and we buy into it, but why? Teddy reminds him quite consistently that he does not truly know who he is, but as viewers that follow him, our natural instinct is to side with Leonard and trust in his memory of himself. His identity is formed around notes and tattoos that he doesn't remember writing or getting done. As Leonard directly explains early in the film, memory is interpretation, not a record. That's why he writes notes; however, Leonard never remembers writing his notes, so he knows he can build his own identity and motive through whatever he writes, reflecting the ties between memory and identity, and how people can self-deceive in order to be happy. The audience, joining him on this journey through the filmmaking structure, mirror Leonard's struggles to construct a coherent identity, as they try to construct the narrative for him through their interpretations.

That leads me to my next point, the audience effect. A film with this kind of structure, in addition to how heavy and haunting its themes are, was received surprisingly well. In Warren Buckland's book on puzzle films, he writes: "Since its release, reviews, forums, and discussions absorbed not only professional critics, but also a great number of interested viewers, all fascinated by the puzzling experience of the film. *Memento* has been dissected, analyzed,

investigated, commented on; students and scholars wrote doctoral theses and essays on the subject, and the film is always referenced when the topic is that of enigmatic, brain-teasing, puzzling cinematic experiences" (87). What I have just done here is share my own interpretation and thoughts on the film, as many others have. The film prompts conversation, and serves as a true landmark in complex storytelling. At the time, distributors faced fear over how confusing it could be for audiences. How can you market a film like this? The hook within the film is already there as soon as it begins, but how can you entice people to sit down and watch? Claire Molloy's deep dive into the film gives some insight into the marketing tactics used for the film. A key aspect of gaining interest was creating a website around the film. This website contains extra material surrounding *Memento*, strengthening its narrative and inviting discussion regarding its interpretation (39). In addition to that, the engagement outside of the film also reflects on memory: "The film's ambiguity became central to *Memento*'s publicity with the director withholding the definitive account of what happened and suggesting that, if viewed enough times, the answers would become clear" (40). At the time of release, discussions on interpretations relied on memory, and if your memory was poor, well you had to go to the theater again. The ambiguity of relying on a website aligns with the risks taken in the film; viewers drawn to one could easily be drawn to the other, strengthening the film's word-of-mouth. The reliance of memory in order to discuss the film ties in with the narrative itself.

Christopher Nolan's *Memento* challenges the conventions of classical Hollywood films and psychological puzzle films by creating an immersive experience, aligning the audience's experience through the film with Leonard's experience of his life through a fragmented perspective. Its narrative structure provides a base to critique memory's foundation of identity, executed further through specifically exploring how people manipulate and deceive themselves

to be more comfortable with their decisions. The fragmentation goes beyond the film; between Leonard and the audience, this base is mirrored with each other by both attempts in piecing together events to form an understanding. The approach to filmmaking and to marketing make the audience an active participant in Leonard's experience, reflecting those themes of memory. Years later, viewers are still invited to discuss their own interpretations, highlighting the strength in this film's storytelling techniques, and securing its place within the psychological puzzle film genre.

Works Cited

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