



Reflections in a Fractured Mirror:

Identity and Reality Construction in “Memento Mori” and *Memento*

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### Abstract

The recent trends in cinema navigate the audience towards an active viewing stance similar to how post-modern literature necessitates the reader's active interpretive efforts. One of such so-called puzzle films is *Memento*, which presents a backwards narrative that gives the reader an inconclusive beginning of the fabula at the end of the film. This essay argues that both *Memento* and its source, the short story "Memento Mori," engage the viewer's and reader's interests and challenge them mentally to emphasise and bring the main themes to a more personal level. This is firstly done by employing a style and narrative structure that imitate the protagonists' condition of anterograde amnesia, causing the reader to struggle with the sense-making of the fabula. Secondly, the fragmented structure corresponds to the protagonists' construction of identity, in which the protagonists serve as an exaggerated mirror to the viewer's own daily identity struggle. Lastly, the situation of narrator and focalisor present the viewer with the issue of not only constructed identity, but also constructed reality. The narrators and focalisors are unreliable and the audience is unable to reconstruct a coherent conclusive fabula from the fragments. While the short story provides less information about the fabula but some sense of closure, the film gives more and conflicting information and prevents closure. This is achieved by presenting different versions of reality through different characters, which denies the viewer the satisfaction of understanding the true nature of the fabula.

## Reflections in a Fractured Mirror:

### Identity and Reality Construction in “Memento Mori” and *Memento*

Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* belongs to those films that have contributed to a fundamental change in cinema from a passive to a more active viewing position. According to Mittell, such “‘puzzle films’ [...] require the audience to learn the particular rules of a film to comprehend its narrative” (37-38), wherein the movies activate a “game aesthetic, inviting the audiences to play along with creators to crack the interpretive codes to make sense of their complex narrative strategies.” Based on a short story by Nolan’s brother Jonathan Nolan, the film tells the story of Leonard, who suffers from anterograde amnesia, i.e. the post-traumatic incapability of creating new short-term memories. Despite his condition, he seeks revenge on his wife’s rapist and killer. The short story revolves around a man called Earl who is institutionalised because of the same condition. He escapes from the institution to avenge his wife’s death.

In the following, I am going to argue that both works use similar stylistic and narrative techniques to engage with the audience. This interaction sets the basis for significant statements about identity and reality, prompting the audience to investigate their own concepts thereof.

#### **Stylistic and Narrative Means to Evoke Viewer Interaction**

The narrative structure in both works imitates the condition of anterograde amnesia for the audience. The narratives are fragmented and the main fabula is interrupted by stylistically distinct sequences. The short story begins with a letter in italics, which addresses Earl and engages the reader by speaking in second person. It establishes the background for his condition and plants the idea of revenge: “*They don’t think it’s right for a man in your condition to hear about those things. But you remember enough, don’t you? You remember*

*his face*” (J. Nolan, pt. 1<sup>1</sup>, original emphasis). He classifies his condition as “[b]ackwards amnesia. That’s what the sign says. CRS disease. Your guess is as good as mine” (original emphasis). The next part begins with Earl waking up in a hospital room, where he tries to do simple things like smoking a cigarette and brushing his teeth according to his notes and a meticulous schedule.

The film has a similar fragmented structure, but makes significant changes to improve the effect on the audience. Colour scenes presenting the main fabula are interrupted by black-and-white scenes in which Leonard provides the backdrop of the story to an anonymous caller on the phone. Similar to the short story, he seems to address the viewer at the same time, especially in the first black-and-white scene in which he establishes his condition by use of voiceover: “So where are you? You’re in some motel room. You just wake up and you’re in a motel room. Here’s the key. It feels like maybe it’s just the first time you’ve been here, but perhaps you’ve been there for a week, three months.”<sup>2</sup> However, *Memento* employs a reversed structure: the first scene, which is shot backwards, presents the end of the fabula in which Leonard kills a man whom the viewer later identifies as Teddy. The rest of the colour fragments gradually build up to the beginning of the film’s story, which shows the viewer how Leonard came to manipulate himself into killing Teddy. Each colour fragment ends the way the previous scene began and is succeeded by a black-and-white scene, merging into a colour fragment during the final scene. This unifies the ending with the beginning; the film starts in colour with a photograph fading into non-existence, and colour seeps into the final scene while Leonard views a photograph. Both photographs are of men he has just killed.

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<sup>1</sup> The part numbers are not part of the original story’s layout, but I have kept the parts from the website for the sake of referencing. It is important to note that these do not signify anything within the original context of the story.

<sup>2</sup> All transcripts of the film are done by myself.



Fig. 1a Polaroid of Teddy at the beginning of the film



Fig. 1b Polaroid of Jimmy at the end of the film

The film also includes flashbacks to Leonard's marriage and his wife's rape and death, as well as longer flashbacks constituting his memories of the story he tells throughout the black-and-white fragments. This embedded story deals with Sammy Jankis, a man supposedly suffering from anterograde amnesia whom Leonard had to investigate in his role as insurance-fraud investigator. Eventually diabetic Mrs Jankis puts her husband to a final test to force his creation of new memories, repeatedly asking him for insulin shots. She consequently enters a coma and dies. Sammy is institutionalised. This embedded text can be seen as a "mirror-text [which] serves as directions for use: the embedded story contains a suggestion how the text should be read" (Bal 63). The viewer is therefore constantly reminded of the futility of conquering the condition and is given a gateway to decipher the film.

While the short story shows progression, as it is fragmented yet chronological, the film investigates causality. Especially "Memento Mori" is so fragmented that the reader cannot

determine how much time has passed between the fragments and cannot reconstruct a complete *fabula*. The futility of time is even thematised explicitly: “*It’s not so much that you’ve lost your faith in time as that time has lost its faith in you. And who needs it, anyway? [...] Believing the lie that time will heal all wounds – which is just a nice way of saying that time deadens us*” (J. Nolan, pt. 11, original emphasis). The film, on the other hand, is highly linear despite its structure, “tak[ing] a linear narrative that once transpired in a straightforward manner, cut[ting] all the scenes into discrete parts, and splic[ing] them together once again in reverse order while they still move in forward motion” (Lyons 128). It provides enough background for the viewer not to feel completely disoriented. Their mental performance is integral to the film – as it is in all puzzle films – because “we are not able to construct a coherent *fabula* during the screening. It is also attractive because the puzzle demands a solution” (Ghislotti 87-88). Instead, “[i]ts narrative interpretation relies crucially on the web of cohesive chains that it constructs within and across scenes rather than on considerations of causes and effects or on interpretations of individual filmic cues or devices” (Tseng and Bateman 116). Both film and short story activate the audience’s cognitive abilities to make sense of and find meaning in them. The projection of the condition onto the audience, especially in the film, sets the basis for a deeper, more personal engagement with the text.

### **Memory and Construction of Identity**

The everyday struggle with identity is amplified by the characters’ memory loss. In the short story, the reader never gets to know Earl properly and only gets access to him through the letters that he writes to his future self. These depict a fractured identity: the past self enters into a dialogue with the future self, but they can never unite due to his inability to make memories: “*It’s a shame, really, that you and I will never meet. But, like the song says, ‘By the time you read this note, I’ll be gone’*” (J. Nolan, pt. 9, original emphasis). The theme of broken identity is extrapolated to the whole of humanity:

*Every man is broken into twenty-four hour fractions, and then again within those twenty-four hours. [...] The angry man hands the baton over to the sulking man, and in turn to the sex addict, the introvert, the conversationalist.*

*Every man is a mob, a chain gang of idiots.* (pt. 5, original emphasis)

The status of Earl as an exaggerated reflection of the reader is thereby established. In the film, there is also some dialogue presented between the past and the present self, although not as elaborate. It consists of notes: on paper, on polaroids and as tattoos, corresponding to Earl's tattoo which reads "I RAPED AND KILLED YOUR WIFE"<sup>3</sup> (pt. 6).



Fig. 2 Some of Leonard's tattoos

In the short story, Earl is identified only through his condition and his wife's death. Much more information is available to the viewer in *Memento*: Leonard's identity used to be his job and his marriage, but it is now based on his lack of memories as well. This serves as a mirror to the viewer, as "[t]hrough its portrayal of Leonard's plight, the film drives home the fact that how we define ourselves as human depends on our sense of time and our ability to retain memories – to enact a narrative self" (Parker 245). The process of fragmentation is visualised by the mirror that is shattered when Leonard is pushed against it during the incident, which causes his condition (Lyons 129). Memory and narration can therefore be considered inherent to one's coherent identity. However, the short story suggests that *all*

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, this is the only one of Earl's notes that speaks in first person. All the other notes are kept in second person to initiate dialogue, whereas this note seems to simply direct anger *at* someone, i.e. the unknown rapist and murderer.

human beings are somewhat fragmented, which raises an interesting issue concerning the mirror scene: is the fragmentation caused by the condition, or is the condition caused by fragmentation and merely amplified by the aftermath of the incident? Either way, the identification with Leonard's condition "compels us to consider how we take for granted our reliance on memory to exist in the world" (Parker 241). It shows how memory and its interpretation is what makes us human. Earl and Leonard represent "a loss of what it means to be human – a situation that Leonard's transformation into an apparent serial killer reinforces" (245). Leonard has to construct his identity anew each time he starts another episode. Ironically, he always seems to see himself as a hero on a heroic quest, but whenever Teddy appears, he is pulled back into reality and loses his sense of heroism (C. Nolan, *Memento*, 1:09:39-1:09:58). But he is no hero: Leonard cannot recover from the wish to avenge his wife without a concept of time or memory. As the "*ten-minute man*" (J. Nolan, pt. 3, original emphasis), he is unable to remember that he has killed the murderer already and is now on a quest to seek another. This problem is evident to Leonard, asking Natalie, "How am I supposed to heal if I can't feel time?" This separates him from and simultaneously connects him with the viewer, who is forced to reflect upon their own identity, the importance of memories and their processing strategies.

### **Focalisation and Reality Construction**

The modes of narration and focalisation provide an entryway into several carefully constructed realities, which necessitates the audience to construct their own version of events. The short story is narrated by an external narrator in the present-time (EN) and a character-bound narrator (CN) in the italicised fragments. Although the story starts with CN, this narrator is on the second level because the letters are embedded in the present-time narrative. The external narrator is an external focaliser (EF) as well: he is able to describe what Earl

does and sees<sup>4</sup>, but only does so in a distant manner. He shades into perceptibility by using words suggesting uncertainty, thus admitting that he is not omniscient. He observes, but cannot state internal reactions with certainty, somewhat like a security camera only recording the actions, but not the interpretations. For instance he observes that “[a]t this point Earl *probably* notices that he is lying on top of his white comforter” (pt. 2, emphasis added). Ambiguous knowledge situations are created when the narrator gives several possibilities of the events: “Earl looks at the picture for a long time. Maybe he begins to cry. Maybe he just stares silently at the picture. Eventually, he makes his way back to the bed, flops down, seals his eyes shut, tries to sleep.” This uncertainty is transferred onto the reader and although Earl explains the situation in his letters, they can never be sure of what is really happening. For instance, the cause of his sudden paranoia in one of his notes is not explained and whether or not it is justifiable: “GET OUT, GET OUT RIGHT NOW. THESE PEOPLE ARE TRYING TO KILL YOU” (pt. 4). The main events that the reader can reconstruct are that Earl’s wife was killed, that he is institutionalised, develops paranoia, somehow escapes from the hospital, gets at least one tattoo and kills someone. All other matters are left unclear, corresponding to the character’s cluelessness: he never knows where he is, why he is there, and what has actually happened. Therefore, the narrative situation draws a parallel to Earl’s situation and puts the reader in his shoes. It could also be argued that EN is actually part of CN – Earl trying to figure out what is going on – whereas the letters are focalised by a character-bound focalisor (CF).

The film is more complex in operating on more narrative levels. It is overall told by CN<sub>Leonard</sub>. The main focalisation is done by CF<sub>Leonard</sub> as well, although the camera necessarily has to represent EF from time to time. The first level consists of the black-and-white fragments which frame the narrative, although this is not evident until the last scene. The status of the colour fragments within this framework is difficult to determine, as they operate

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<sup>4</sup> In this way, he may attempt to merge with a character-bound focalisor, but his external position is still foregrounded.

parallel to the black-and-white sequences. However, it can be argued that they appear on the second level because they are later on subordinate to the black-and-white scenes. The third level contains character-bound narrations by different characters: Natalie and Teddy both present their own versions of events. Natalie's is unmasked as a lie in the subsequent scene, but the truthfulness of Teddy's narrative remains unclear due to the effect of focalisation on constructing and deciphering reality.

As Leonard focalises the film, the viewer is torn between seeing him as unreliable and simultaneously identifying with him. Bal points out that

[a] special case of focalization [...] is memory. Memory is an act of 'vision' of the past but [...] situated in the present of the memory. It is often a narrative act: loose elements come to cohere into a story [...]. But [...] memories are unreliable – in relation to the fabula – and when put into words, they are rhetorically overworked so that they can connect to an audience [...]. The discrepancy becomes dramatic and, indeed, incapacitating in the case of trauma. (150)

The fact that the whole film revolves around memory is therefore problematic. On the one hand, the viewer is inclined to believe in Leonard's system as it displays a certain logic and a conquering of his condition. On the other hand, the background information is focalised by Leonard too: his narration of Sammy's story is accompanied by flashbacks. When confronted about manipulating Leonard into killing Jimmy, Teddy presents his version of the events: the Sammy described is actually Leonard himself, whose wife survived the assault. Mrs Jankis represents Leonard's wife who died from an insulin overdose. Even when Leonard denies that his wife was diabetic, an alternate version of his memories is presented:



Fig. 3a Early flashback of Leonard's wife



Fig. 3b Later flashback of Leonard's wife with insulin

This interpretation is suggested earlier in the film, too. Sammy is depicted sitting in a wheelchair at a hospital, looking up as someone passes him. He is briefly covered by the figure, but when it leaves the shot, Leonard is shown in the wheelchair instead. The function of this shot is to “[indicate] a metonymical swap and transformation not only of Shelby and his ongoing construction of self but more importantly of our perception of the film’s overall events to this point” (Lyons 133).



Fig. 4a Sammy at the hospital



Fig. 4b Leonard at the hospital

However, there are problems regarding this interpretation as well: if Leonard has accidentally killed his wife, how can he remember the story of Sammy, which, partly his own, would have occurred *after* the incident? One possibility that Teddy suggests is that Leonard has been continually conditioning himself to memorise the story the way he wants it. Another interesting issue in reality construction is presented in the hidden audio commentaries<sup>5</sup> by Nolan. Next to the neutral first commentary, the second one states that Teddy is lying to deliberately distort Leonard's long-term memories. Although the viewer knows Teddy to be untrustworthy, they are more inclined to believe him instead of using the interpretive tools the film has so far offered. His lies ultimately lead to his death. The third commentary states that Teddy is telling the truth, backed up by plausible evidence, and has done so many times before. Here, his continuous truth-telling leads to his downfall (C. Nolan, *Memento*, 1:38:16-1:46:27).

The viewer is therefore presented with several versions of realities, none of which are entirely conclusive or flawless. If reality can be manipulated in such a way by Leonard to deceive himself – by deliberately planting false clues for himself in order to pursue Teddy as the murderer –, reality is a flexible, highly subjective construct. The other characters continually employ this method as well to manipulate and use Leonard. Both Teddy and

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<sup>5</sup> There are three audio commentary tracks on the DVD, which cannot be chosen from the menu. They are the same until the final scene, at which point the DVD player chooses a random audio track unless the viewer initiates another one at the same moment. When viewing the DVD on a computer, all three tracks are presented in the media player-specific audio settings.

Natalie “construct versions of ‘reality’ in attempts to actualize their own agendas” (Lyons 132). Especially Natalie is shown to use and abuse Leonard, taking advantage of his condition. Although none of the characters are reliable, the viewer is conflicted about whom and what to believe, partly because they sympathise with the characters before the film gives them the means to realise their true nature (Parker 252). Another tool for interpretation lies in the visual and the auditive narrators, which are technically equal (Verstraten 130), but conventionally, “if there are no signs indicating the contrary, the visual track is always right: seeing is believing” (136). However, these two narrators clash in *Memento* and it is up to the viewer to decide which tells the truth: whether they would rather believe the auditive or the visual narrator (Parker 249).

## **Conclusion**

“You don’t believe someone with this condition!” Leonard desperately exclaims to his anonymous caller, aware that he is quite an unreliable narrator – which corresponds to the viewer’s conflict in reconstructing the film’s reality. As shown in the previous sections, both works employ similar methods and modes to establish this unreliability and subjectivity: they first engage the viewer by duplicating the medical condition stylistically and structurally. Throughout the narratives, the effect of memory (loss) on identity and reality construction are explored. The way this is done calls for the audience to become more active in reconstructing the fabula and deciphering the works’ meaning. Especially *Memento* plays with and manipulates the viewer’s memory through structure and focalisation similar to how other characters manipulate Leonard’s. Since focalisation is limited to Leonard, the viewer never knows anything beyond what the character knows, except for the advantage of remembering future events on the fabula level. The film prevents closure because it leaves too many open questions: which version of reality is the true one? When is the film situated in the timeline? What happened before the film? Leonard, like Earl, may have escaped from a hospital, as his

institutionalisation is suggested in the Sammy parallel, but if so, why is he operating under his real name? How does he know Jimmy? Despite their knowledge advantage, the audience is just as clueless as Leonard himself. The short story provides more closure as Earl presumably sits in a police car in the final fragment, which should put an end to his revenge.

By creating such a parallel between audience and character, the works motivate the viewer to become critical of the narrative, its agents and themselves. The meta level is significant here as well. When considering Nolan's conflicting audio commentaries, there does not appear to be a 'correct' interpretation of the events. Hence, the film presents alternative but equally valid realities. It is likely that the viewer comes to a different conclusion upon each viewing.

Concluding, *Memento* incorporates the fragmented narrative, the overall feel and the themes addressed in "Memento Mori" rather well. It is an in-depth point-of-departure adaptation of the short story's essence, but expands the fabula to make it into a coherent feature-length film. All important elements of the short story can be found in the film, but the crucial change of the narrative to a backwards structure imitates the medical condition more effectively than the short story does.

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