SOMEWHERE IN THE NIGHT: MEMENTO

fto

1931-**2005**
FILM AS TEXT

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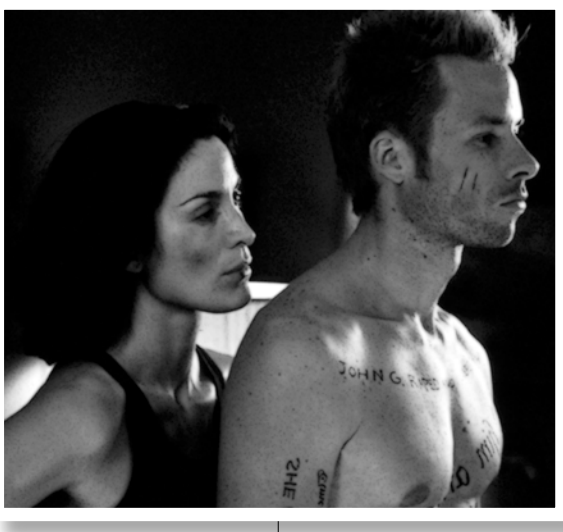
In the opening shot of Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) we see a Polaroid photograph fade to a blank sheet of paper. As you watch the shapes dissolve and the colours disappear, you become aware that here is a film with a bravura sense of experiment. Constructed entirely out of flashbacks, *Memento* aspires to a rich tradition – *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), *Don't Look Now* (Nicholas Roeg, 1973) – while the director has been compared with such masters of the scrambled narrative as Welles, Resnais and Roeg.

Memento also belongs to a distinctive strand of genre cinema. Revolving around a hero who has lost his memory and his moral and epistemological bearings, it plays out the thriller scenario of the desperate protagonist whose very experiences seem to evaporate as he passes

through events. *Memento* is the logical end game of the amnesic strain of American film noir.

A man alone ...

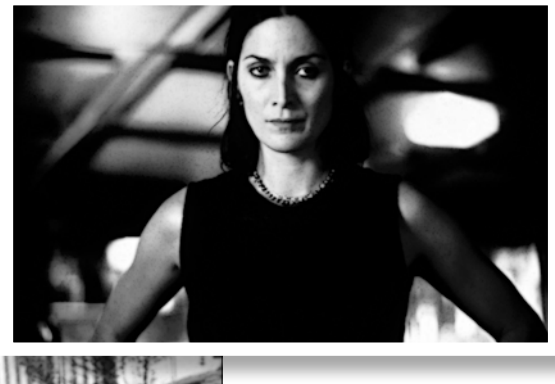
Traditionally, film noir foregrounds the fears and anxieties of male characters seeking self-affirmation. Emerging in the years immediately following World War Two, these films can be read as explorations of the American status quo at a crucial moment in the nation's history. Indirectly examined in film noir were the unspoken fears – war guilt, the rise of a female workforce, white suburbs versus black ghettoes

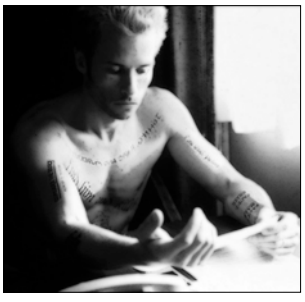


– seething between the lines of America's post-war triumphalism. Film noir scenarios provided exciting and poignant vehicles for exorcising the bad dreams of returning servicemen, soothing sexual and economic inadequacy, and allaying the concerns of ordinary Americans in a politically altering world. One of the film noir genre's quintessential figures is the man alone; often an emotionally scarred character trying to make sense of this changing environment. Alienation from the rhythms and responses of everyday life marks these films. As historian Alain Silver eloquently writes: 'Its figures are the Accused, Abandoned, Cornered, Framed, Railroaded, Convicted, Caged and Desperate.'[11] Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* is so wracked with guilt he cannot hear his own footsteps. In *Somewhere in the Night* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1946), George Taylor is an ex-Marine with amnesia who has only two clues to his past. The similarities between this film and *Memento* are striking. On the night his wife Catherine (Jorja Fox) was raped and murdered, Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) lost his memory. He is now bent on finding the man who did it and killing him. But like George Taylor, the truth Leonard uncovers will undermine everything he thinks he knows. Leonard descends from an essential strain of noir protagonist: damaged, confused and alone. *Double Indemnity* also recalls a fraught past in flashback as insurance salesman Walter Neff becomes party to an investigation of fraud. In a clever recycling of that film, *Memento* makes Leonard an insurance claims investigator. By the end, revelations about 'Lenny' come to seem thoroughly shocking.

A woman ...

At the heart of the masculine predicament in film noir there usually lies a woman. Much has been written about the dangerous women of film noir. Again, historical resonances echo across *Memento*. In 1945, American servicemen appeared to face nothing short of an entire social shift. Acculturated over campaign after campaign to the company of other men, they were doubtless feeling inadequate before the re-adjustment to domestic life as the air taxis dropped them back Stateside. Once home, they found that, during the war, large numbers of women had been recruited to work in munitions factories and aircraft plants. Many more took jobs vacated by departing servicemen in shops, offices and public transport. With money in her purse and a mind to enjoy herself, the American woman was learning to work hard and play hard. Noir films are frequently propelled by the agendas of – and the damage done by – these intelligent and alluring characters. In *Double Indemnity,* Phyllis Dietrich-





son schemes with Walter Neff up to murder her husband and defraud the insurance company. In *Memento* Leonard relates the story of the Jankis couple, a case which he was assigned to investigate. Sammy Jankis (Stephen Tobolowsky) is suffering from the same Anterograde Amnesia – an inability to form new memories after brain injury – that Leonard suffers from. Mrs Jankis (Harriet Sansom Harris) is keen to claim compensation. But the insurance company is not convinced that Sammy's condition is physical – Leonard's was caused by a blow to the head – and so are reluctant to pay up. Meanwhile, Sammy appears to recognize Leonard whenever he visits. What is the company, and what are we, to make of Mrs Jankis' motives?

'She Has Lost Someone. She Will Help You Out Of Pity.'

It has proved easy for successive generations of commentators to damn the woman in film noir. Harder perhaps is to see her as the delirious imagining of a generation of worried and weary men. Phyllis Dietrichson is rotten because we see her through Walter Neff's and claims investigator Barton Keyes' eyes. In *Memento,* Leonard is stranded between his perceptions of Catherine, Mrs Jankis, and Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss), who wants to help Leonard find the man who killed his wife. In a film in which Dody Dorn's editing relies on close-ups, details rather than establishing shots and a ranging inclusive camera, we recall the claims investigator's faith in facts, not suppositions: 'Memories can be distorted. They're just an interpretation, they're not a record, and they're irrelevant if you have the facts,' Leonard tells Teddy (Joe Pantoliano), another helper in his quest. When Natalie invites Leonard to recall his wife, we see a series of flashback fragments – Catherine looking out of the window, reading in bed, sitting alone, in the kitchen, in the dark, her back to us – as he remembers how she looked, smiled, smelt. Leonard has his eyes closed as he speaks. But Leonard's recollections of Catherine are true only insofar as they recall moments he spent with her. For us (and for him), they remain fragments of a reality we have yet to realize the meaning of. It is ontologically valid to say that the world continues to exist while your eyes are closed. But when you open them you interpret what you see not objectively but for *yourself*. More rigorously philosophical than most other films noir, *Memento* toys with the consequences of the relationship between an individual's point-of-view and agenda, and the objective neutral world around him. It is a measure of Leonard's disorientation, and our helpless allegiance to his quest, that none of these women will turn out to be who we thought they were.

'The world doesn't just disappear when you close your eyes, does it?'

As characters, Natalie and Catherine adhere to familiar Hollywood archetypes. Catherine is the dutiful, loving wife. Natalie is the faithful best pal-cum-lover. Always

there, always sympathetic to the hero's plight, always ready to help. Lonely and disorientated after war service, disgusted when his wife leaves him, Johnny Morrison in *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) becomes reliant on Joyce, the wife of the nightclub owner who lures Johnny's wife away from him. 'SHE HAS LOST SOMEONE. SHE WILL HELP YOU OUT OF PITY' reads the prompt on Leonard's Polaroid of Natalie. The helpmeet archetype is often a working woman, practical and down-to-earth by comparison with the genre's more calculating and exotic femme fatale. Grounded in the same workaday world as the protagonist, who is often a cheap detective, salesman, re-adjusting soldier, the helpmeet is a regular 'guy'. Natalie works behind a bar. 'You know what we have in common? We are both survivors,' she tells Leonard. When he seems most lost, Natalie is there to catch him. At one point, he wanders past her in a diner and she grabs him as he shuffles by her table. Significantly, however, the Polaroid he takes so that he will remember her is blurred and out-of-focus. If Leonard does not recall enough to see that Natalie has her own agenda, the film teaches the spectator not to trust her. What becomes clearer to us is that Natalie has her own reasons for befriending the poor sap. The girlfriend of a drug dealer who is in trouble with a man named Dodd, Natalie wants Leonard to kill Dodd for her. Without knowing why he has done so, Leonard kidnaps Dodd and ties him up. Earlier on – later in the film – we see Natalie, who has been beaten, urge Leonard to go and find Dodd. Earlier still, in Carrie-Anne Moss' best scene, Natalie tells him: 'You know what? I think I'm gonna use you. I can say whatever the fuck I want, and you won't remember. We'll still be friends. Or maybe even lovers.' After he lashes out at her, Natalie goes and sits in her car. After a few moments she comes back in and tells Leonard that Dodd beat her. Leonard, of course, does not remember what really happened. With their blend of vitriol and allure, Natalie's words epitomize the mirage that is the femme fatale in film noir; simultaneously dependent and angry, repulsive and magnetic, available and absent. As in Leonard's picture, the femme fatale is typically shady.

'You sad, sad freak …'

The dominant narrative in Hollywood cinema is the formation of the couple, the male protagonist's search for his female soul mate. This romantic trajectory gives shape and meaning to films across the genres. But in film noir, whether through trauma or loneliness, the masculine search for romantic fulfillment becomes a perverted courtship marked by pain and desire. During the 1940s, the Hollywood narrative style of filmmaking reached its purest state of development, before evolving into the mannerism and baroquerie suggested by some westerns, melodramas, and the psychotic perspectives of film noir. Appearing in our era of moral ambivalence and addressing a far more cineliterate audience, 'neo-noir' is the contemporary evolutionary moment through which the noir impulse is passing. British academic Andrew Spicer dates 'postmodern neo-noir' from around 1981, the year of *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Bob Rafelson), themselves inspired by *Double Indemnity* and the 1946 original of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett). While owing its mood and atmosphere to the classical model, postmodern neo-noir intensifies the usual noir traits. Classical noir was marked by narrative complexity and ambiguity of character, but movies like *The Underneath* (Steven Soderbergh, 1995) and *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), with which *Memento* has been compared, see classical narrative in disarray. As Spicer writes: 'Postmodern noir's excess is also evident in its highly complex narratives where the convoluted plots often circle back on themselves, and by a pervasive uncertainty about the reliability of what is being shown or told.'[2] Indeed, as the psychotic Leonard repeats the same cycle of behaviour, this becomes reflected in *Memento*'s structure, which seems to revolve as each scene returns to the beginning of the last scene you watched, gradually revealing to us that which his short term memory dysfunction constantly erases. Spicer hints at neo-noir's historical allegiances: '*Memento*'s thoroughgoing jumble of subjective and objective states where it is impossible to separate "facts" and knowledge from lies or self-protecting fantasies, pushing generic fiction close to the radical ambiguity associated with European art cinema.'[3] If in the wake of industry experiments like *Citizen Kane* and *Double Indemnity*, classical film noir deconstructed conventional Hollywood narrative, from *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967) neo-noir fed from the radical experimentation of Europeans like Resnais, Antonioni and Roeg. Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* remains a brilliant example of convoluted structure, while in appearance and temper Guy Pearce's Leonard even recalls David Bowie's alien in Roeg's *The Man who Fell to Earth* (1976).

'There are things you know for sure'

If the Shelby marriage seems on the surface calm and ideal until the night of Catherine's despoliation, events leave Leonard unable to judge the verisimilitude of anything or anyone. Like the returning veteran in classical film noir, Leonard is literally walking wounded, his body a map of tattooed queries driven by uncontrollable vengeance. By thematizing detection, this film encourages the cinephile habit of 'scanning' – making notes about a film as it unfolds – for it is strewn with clues to the seriousness of Leonard's condition. In one desperate moment, he is running through the streets under the impression that he is chasing somebody when in fact somebody is chasing him. Elsewhere, he smashes an apartment door down, braining somebody on the other side. In a film of little but telling humour, Leonard then realizes that he is after a man in apartment 9, but his note was upside down, pointing him in the direction of apartment 6! One flashback finds Catherine and Leonard having a conversation about reading a book she has already read and knows the outcome of, recalling our

task as, scene by scene, we must return to the origins of an experience the protagonist has always already had, but forgotten.

'Remember Sammy Jankis'

Throughout the film, Leonard is telling somebody about the Jankis case, which unfolds in conventional narrative succession while Leonard's odyssey goes back in time. Why do we need to know what happened to Sammy Jankis? After a car accident, the 58-year-old accountant suddenly began to lose his memory. Understandably, Mrs Jankis was very worried. She and Mr Jankis had been married for many years and she did not want to lose her Sammy. When Leonard unofficially confides to her that he does not think Sammy is physically incapable of forming new memories, the diabetic goes home and repeatedly reminds Sammy to see to her insulin injections. Sammy dutifully does so and she gradually slips into a coma and dies. Sammy ends up in a hospital for the insane. Did Mrs Jankis hope that Sammy would snap out of it in time to know what he was doing? Or was it simply the thought of spending the rest of her life with him in that state that made her do it? While there is undoubtedly a parallel between Sammy Jankis and Leonard, I think a parallel can be detected between Mrs Jankis and the emotionally abandoned noir hero. And in a way, Mr Jankis is like us. But while Sammy fails the insurance company tests designed to determine whether his illness can be circumvented by rote, through instinctive learning, we the viewers succeed in recognizing the signposts at the end of each scene, having learnt instinctively to anticipate a cut to the next.

Whatever you prefer to think, the sundering of the Jankis marriage feels like a symptom of neo-noir's rupturing of the Hollywood classical closure on which cinemagoers of the Jankis generation pinned their hopes. The Jankis story appears in black and white. Are we to suppose that monochrome, traditionally associated with documentary, is being used as code for this story's authenticity? Or is this neo-noir's playful allusion to the realism of another, more reliable classicism? If in a stylistically more conventional genre like the romantic comedy, older couples habitually set healthy loving examples for searching young folk, in the neo-noir world of *Memento* the Jankis marriage becomes a suburban hutch of pain and disappointment. In this labyrinthine, difficult film, it is important for the acting to be naturalistic and believable. Stephen Tobolowsky and Harriet Sansom Harris play their roles with conviction and density, and the Jankis thread becomes the nearest thing to a moral centre in a drama in which nobody is redeemed.

And the Jankis story also becomes a metaphor for what happened that night in the Shelby household. It is not until the beginning of Leonard's odyssey, or the end of the film, that Teddy reveals that Catherine survived the rape. It was Leonard who accidentally killed her by administering a lethal dose of insulin. Teddy originally investigated the case, but when the police dropped the investigation, the corrupt cop continued to search for suspects with the initials 'J.G.' for Leonard to kill. They have been searching for suspects ever since. We are reminded that in *The Blue Dahlia* (George Marshall, 1946), Johnny Morrison's war buddy Buzz murdered Johnny's wife while suffering a blackout caused by a shell fragment in his brain. *Memento* begins as Leonard kills 'Teddy', whose actual initials are J(ohn) G(ammell) …

Christopher Nolan's film appeared in 2000, five years after the centenary of the first publicly exhibited films presented by the Lumière brothers in Paris in 1895. Throughout its history, the cinema has fed on detective stories. Like the movies, the detective story is a product of the nineteenth century. With the decline of religious faith and the growing sophistication of police methods, the narrative of rational detection tapped into the post-Enlightenment intellectual conviction that private enterprise and personal perspective govern human behaviour in the modern era to a greater extent than propositional revelation and recognition of a higher justice. In detective stories from Edgar Allan Poe to Raymond Chandler, the truth about human motivation and agency comes down to the physical evidence of events, normally little more than a handful of objects and messages – Polaroids, a licence number, words on skin – serving as clues to the reality of the crime. Internet Movie Database commentator 'Alice Liddel' speaks of *Memento*'s metaphysical plight when she writes: 'Guy Pearce's rather splendid physique as palimpsest: where history is recorded at random, where the keys of interpretation are lost. The split between mind and body is complete, and with it the essence of unified humanity.'[4] All Leonard Shelby really knows is that the Polaroids and tattoos he relies on exist. But what do they mean? We are reminded of *The Usual Suspects*, in which 'Verbal' Kint's account of the film's events is radically undermined for the detective interrogating him as the detective realizes that the story has been concocted out of elements on a police notice board. *The Usual Suspects* was released exactly a hundred years after the Lumière brothers startled audiences with their revelation of a self-evident world. As Liddel recognizes, the neo-noir detective Leonard Shelby is actually an anti-detective, not resolving a crime but implicating himself the more he investigates. On the eve of a new millennium, in an age without God, and in an era of movies that increasingly undermine the veracity of the image, the truth comes down to your point-of-view.

Endnotes

1 Alain Silver in *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, Overlook TP, USA, 1993, p.4.

2 Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir*, Longman, NewYork, 2002, p.158.

3 ibid, p.159.

4 Alice Liddel on the Internet Movie Database: http://uk.imdb.com/title/tt0209144/usercomments