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Healing without feeling time: Trauma in Christopher Nolan's
Memento

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ABSTRACT: With the production of *Memento*, Christopher Nolan gifted The Seventh Art not only with a superb film but also with a sophisticated narration of a trauma. This study carries out an analysis of the film's main character, Leonard, who has been affected by the traumatic experience of the death of his wife. While he struggles with his short-term memory loss and his quest for revenge, several issues surrounding the increasingly acclaimed trauma theory can be recognized, namely latency, memory, identity, dissociation or repression. This dissertation examines these concerns from two different standpoints, as the film text offers more than one interpretation.

KEY WORDS: trauma – traumatic experience – latency – memory – identity – dissociation – repression.

RESUMEN: Con la creación de *Memento*, Christopher Nolan no solo obsequió al Séptimo Arte con una magnífica película, sino también con una compleja narración de un trauma. Este estudio lleva a cabo un análisis del personaje principal de la película, Leonard, quien ha sido afectado por la traumática experiencia de la muerte de su mujer. Al mismo tiempo que se enfrenta a su pérdida de memoria reciente y su búsqueda de venganza, varios aspectos relacionados con la cada vez más popular teoría de trauma son identificados, a saber, latencia, memoria, identidad, disociación o represión. Este trabajo examina estos temas desde dos perspectivas diferentes, ya que el texto fílmico ofrece más de una interpretación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: trauma – experiencia traumática – latencia – memoria – identidad – disociación – represión.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Justification and objectives

Always captivated by films such as Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001), and Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006) and *Inception* (2010), I came to realize that my interest in them dwelt not as much in the plot as in the narrative structure. I unintentionally developed a liking to complicated storylines that could not be fully understood at first glance. Being challenged by the film and struggling to sort out what I was given became almost a must for me. Consequently, I established my first potential dissertation topic: non-linear narrative. However, the purpose I fixed for it required the analysis of a considerable number of film texts including *The Prestige*, *Inception*, *Memento* (2000) and the then recently premiered *Dunkirk* (2017). Nonetheless, this would be way too complicated, and its extension would undoubtedly surpass the established word limit.

After ruling out this idea, a much feasible one arose. Thenceforward I would deal with *Memento* as the only film text in this study. There was the downside of not knowing how to approach it in an appealing way, nonetheless. After several weeks of uncertainty, my doubts would fade away when I attended a seminar held at the University of La Rioja under the name "Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Literature and Film". Then, I understood what trauma studies were and its importance as a field of their own.

"Trauma" is described as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 1996: 11) and has being an issue central to a field of knowledge of its own for decades, being Sigmund Freud the most prolific expert on the matter in its initial steps. Thenceforward, several authors, among which we could find Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth, have followed his path into the exploration of trauma and how traumatic experiences affect life. The study of trauma finds in recent history a large variety of events that have inevitably left a wound in the psyche of the worldwide population. The attacks of September 11, the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, or the more recent ISIS terrorist attacks all over the world since 2014, are events that caused, and still cause, a deep pain both for individuals and for society as a collective.

It is in the complexity of how traumatic experiences affect each person where my purpose lies. *Memento's* main character may very well be considered a victim of a traumatic experience, which in my opinion should be an interesting issue to address as the film text has not hitherto been thoroughly analysed from a trauma theory perspective. The majority of approaches to *Memento*, though, deal with the unreliability of the narrator, its complicated narrative structure, or just analyse the text as a part of the film noir genre as is the case of David Caldevilla and José Díaz-Cuesta's "El Relato Clásico Negro Frente a la Nueva Narrativa Segmentada: *Memento*" (2012). As for works that develop a study of both the film text and trauma theory, it is worth mentioning William F. Little's "Surviving *Memento*" and Michael Schmid's "Narrative Memory and the impact of Trauma on individuals with reference to one short sequence from "*Memento*"", an intervention included in the seminar entitled American Cultural Memory: Trauma, Collective Imagery and the Politics of Remembering. Thus, the possibility of carrying out a study that would analyse the film text from this perspective became outright tantalizing. As a result, the main purpose of this study would be the analysis of Christopher Nolan's *Memento* as the narrative of a trauma.

1.2. Methodology

For the writing of this paper, I found pertinent to divide the analysis into three sections. The first and the third sections represent the analysis of the film text from different perspectives.

The first one addresses the notion of traumatic experience in *Memento* representing the character of Leonard as the survivor of a trauma of multiple dimensions, which accentuates his role of victim. Him bearing a double wound, psychological and physical, is presented as a central issue that also aggravates his condition, and hinders his quest for revenge: he wants to kill the murderer of his wife.

The third one presents the issue of trauma from another perspective. The character could also be seen as the responsible for the death of his wife, rendering his initial role of vigilante inadmissible. His wound according to this second view presents trauma in an arguably more painful and deep manner.

The second section is based on the explanations Christopher Nolan gives in two online interviews, namely with YouTube user *Eyes on Cinema* and with *Filmmaker Magazine's* Chuck Stephens, regarding the film and its complexity. His words justify

the possibility of the audience being able to interpret his work from different perspectives, providing new layers both to the character of Leonard and to the trauma he bears. This section, thus, would suit the role of connecting link between both approaches to trauma in the film text.

As for the sources consulted, much of the theoretical information has been retrieved from Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) and *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), and Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1997). I found these works magnificent sources that also complement each other altogether. While *Unclaimed Experience* encompasses the main ideas of Sigmund Freud's ideology and other views from other authors such as Jacques Lacan, her other work, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, reunites the collaborative work of a considerable number of contemporary experts in the field of trauma theory. In the present study, I frequently resort to Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart's chapter "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" which can be found in Caruth's work. For complementary information regarding trauma theory, I also consulted Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2014).

As for the works consulted that do not deal with trauma theory, Volker Ferenz' *Don't believe his lies: the unreliable narrator in Contemporary American Cinema* (2008) was quite useful when dealing with unreliability, whereas Julia Eckel's "Twisted Times: Non-linearity and Temporal Disorientation in Contemporary Cinema" was an excellent material I used to define the type of structure the film text presents.

2. Analysis

2.1. Leonard as the survivor of the traumatic experience

2.1.1. A multiple layer trauma

Leonard is the character I will be basing this analysis on, for his condition clearly points at a traumatized psyche. The viewer learns about his traumatic experience by means of a flashback, in which he portrays himself as the victim of a brutal assault. Leonard is presented in bed, but as he wakes up in the middle of the night, he finds his wife was missing. Some unexpected noises come from the restroom, so he rushes to grab his gun and heads to the bathroom. When he violently opens the door, he finds his wife lying on the floor covered by the shower curtain while being strangled by a masked man. Leonard quickly shoots him dead, but a second man suddenly hits his head from behind with a sap and then proceeds to shove him against the mirror head first (F01)¹. The viewer is witness to a totally numb Leonard who falls down as blood flows out of his skull. The last thing he is able to see before he faints is the face of his wife dying still veiled by the transparent curtain (F02).



F01



F02

As the film advances, one learns that due to the seriousness of his head injuries, he has developed a condition defined as "short-term memory loss". Doctor Saul McLeod explains this ailment, frequently known as "anterograde amnesia", as the "loss of memory for events after an incident" (2011). Consequently, Leonard is unable to remember anything that occurs after this fatal event. As a result, the last memory he preserves is his wife dying, which is a piece of information that would be repeated several times along the film. However, that is not the most relevant downside of his

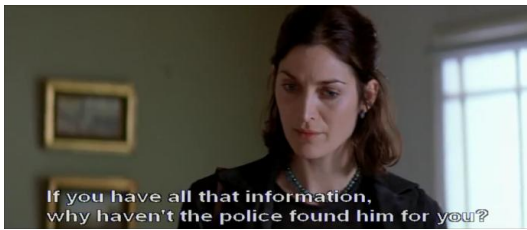
¹ Figures F01-F38 have been retrieved from the DVD version of the film text *Memento*.

condition. In spite of his injury, he can live normally, although it is only for a few minutes. We are never told about that exact time span, but Jonathan Nolan's "Memento Mori", the short-story in which the film is inspired by, informs the reader that it is ten minutes the approximate amount of time the character has (Nolan 2002: 187). After that period, his recent memory disappears and his last memory before the accident becomes his latest. In other words, he is constantly remembering his wife lying dead.

The dimension of Leonard's trauma is complex, for it presents different layers that overlap each other resulting in a difficult wall tremendously difficult to break through. This event, as I have mentioned, occurs at night-time while sleeping. The actions of getting the gun, opening the door, shooting the gun and receiving the blow to the head only take around a minute to develop. Action is straightforwardly fast. In fact, it is too fast for Leonard. Traumatic occurrences take place, according to Freud, "too soon, too suddenly, too unexpectedly" (Caruth 1996: 101), which makes the traumatized individual unable to understand them fully. Leonard cannot understand what has happened because there is literally no time to process the information.

His struggle to make sense out of the traumatic experience, and of his current life for that matter, is considerably difficult. Leonard does not have a conclusive and complete truth, which is a roadblock in his path towards healing his emotional wound. One must understand everything, have every element in order, so the traumatic memory could be assimilated into normal existing mental schemes (van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 176). His quest for finding the murderer of his wife is inherently exhausting, but it is hugely aggravated by several hurdles along his way. Teddy and Natalie, which are arguably the most important secondary characters, are trying to take advantage of Leonard's condition to make profit out of it. The audience learns that Teddy has been in contact with Leonard for a long time and that he has been manipulating him, using him as his particular hitman ever since. Natalie, who does not seem as wicked as Teddy, eventually uses Leonard to get rid of Dodd, a man that was after her as her boyfriend Jimmy Grantz had disappeared with an important amount of money. Even Burt, the receptionist at the Discount Inn rents him two rooms at the same time to make some extra money. Who to trust is a central issue in *Memento* and it is a stress factor for Leonard's traumatized mind, for nobody is there to help him out with the exception of himself, although his condition is intrinsically misleading. Thus, what really happened is never fully known. His last resort is a file containing the information regarding the traumatic event. Although it contains the clues that have led him to the point he is at, it

is incomplete, hence questionable, for it does not contain any information about a second intruder (F03 and F04).



F03



F04

The viewer would trust Leonard, as he is unquestionably portrayed as the likeable victim (Ferenz 2008: 133), but the event is uncertain nonetheless. Trying to figure out everything, the valiant attempt to make sense out of his trauma, is a real challenge and being surrounded by characters that are constantly deceiving him lowers his probabilities of success.

I shall also note how much importance does the craniocerebral injury have in *Memento*. "Trauma" is a concept that has its roots with the scope of the body and not with the one of the mind. His condition, the reason why he can no longer retain new memories, is apparently the result of a physical wound, and not an emotional one. According to Caruth, Freud does address the concept of physical trauma when discussing Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581) referring to it as "simple and healable". As far as the viewer is concerned, though, Leonard's injury is complex, permanent and irreversible. The psychological trauma he carries with him, however, has a completely different dimension. Leonard is shocked at the sight of his wife being choked to death, but there is some mystery surrounding Leonard's emotional response. It is obviously a terrible memory, but one might suggest that he is not really traumatized *per se*. Not only has he been the victim of two unknown men breaking and entering his home, but has also witnessed one of them strangling his wife. It is indeed a harmful experience, and his medical condition obliges him to remember it as it was recent. He never wants to remember, he is forced to.

That being said, it is pertinent to resort to Caruth's review of Freud's take on trauma theory. The introduction of the term "traumatic neurosis" as the "unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (Caruth 1996: 2) points directly at an intriguing matter in the film text. Are the recurring memories of the

traumatic event actually a product of his condition of traumatized individual or is the reenactment of the experience just a result of anterograde amnesia? It is indeed a cunning point because assuming that relieving the traumatic experience is merely caused by his damaged brain, we cannot state Leonard has been traumatized by the aforementioned accident at all.

When revising Freud and Caruth works, one can easily find a concept that seems to be habitual in any approach to trauma theory. There is a period of time in which the traumatized individual does not present a particular response to the traumatic event. One may argue that it is similar to an emotional limbo. Accidents or traumatic events, in the main, are unexpected and are extremely violent for the mind, and as a result, there is no chance to assimilate them as if they were simple pieces of information because they are totally different types of memories. This time span is frequently named "belatedness", a term coined by Sigmund Freud. Notwithstanding, I will be referring to it as "latency", which is the word used by Cathy Caruth to refer to "the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent" (1996: 17). This mental distance between the event and the reaction of the victim to it is not immediate, that is, it takes time. Then, how can Leonard experience this period of latency if he cannot feel time? And if he cannot experience it, can he actually have an emotional response to the event as I have previously suggested? Actually, there is no virtual time to process the murder of his wife. He is bound to fail every time when trying to fully understand what happened because he does not have time to even have the opportunity to process that memory. It is quite easy to assume that there is a lack of emotional response. As a matter of fact, what Leonard keeps saying is that he has a special condition, making his brain injury seem the most important part of his misfortune, and therefore his emotional trauma would not be as fundamental as it may seem.

However, I believe it is necessary to pay attention to the concept of trauma in *Memento* in the most essential sense of the word, that is, the physical. The film text is inherently complicated, and the issue of trauma would be no exception. Leonard is quite aware of his situation in regard to time; he understands the complexity of his situation, which is already saying something. He is also willing to get over the traumatic experience and the emotional wound, that is, he wants to heal. However, he is also conscious that without feeling the passage of time, living a life where this dimension is eroded, he is unlikely to recover. One may argue that he is currently working through, a state in which the traumatized individual is able to recall the event as part of the past

while being prepared to recover and keep living (LaCapra 2014: 22). He still loves his deceased wife, but that does not mean that he refuses to live looking forward to the future. Here lies one of the big paradoxes in *Memento*. Although Leonard can locate the traumatic experience in the past, which would mean he is working through, as Dominick LaCapra puts it, he is unintentionally stuck in the past still mourning the loss due to the fact that he feels the memory as if it were recent. Considering this, Leonard would be still acting out, that is, the state in which "one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes" (LaCapra 2014: 21). When the traumatized individual is in this state it feels as if the past had returned to the present, which is exactly the situation Leonard is living. The same question arises again as if we could not overlook it anymore: is Leonard stuck in the past because of his physical injury or because of his emotional harm?

Were one to affirm Leonard is a traumatized person, both dimensions, physical and emotional, need to be considered at the same time, and not as parallel phenomena, but as a unified trauma. The pain of remembering his wife passing away every few minutes is inexorably connected to his brain injury, and, at the same time, his craniocerebral injury would not be such a burden if it was not for the traumatic sight of his wife perishing. I dare to affirm that his anterograde amnesia is not an encumbrance because Leonard affirms that he has successfully managed to live with it based on his strict conditioning methods. Notes, photographs and tattoos constitute his coping mechanism to bear the short-memory loss. He is particularly proud of himself for succeeding in systematizing his life in such a manner. Sammy Jankis, a man who bore the same condition, however, could not do it.

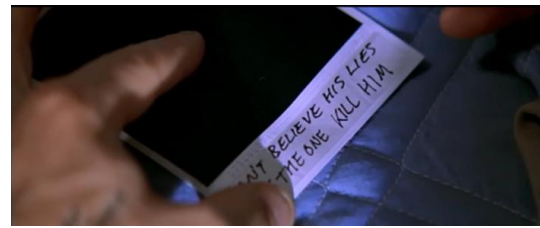
LEONARD: Sammy wrote himself endless amounts of notes. But he'd get mixed up. I've got a more graceful solution to the memory problem. I'm disciplined and organized. I use habit and routine to make my life possible. Sammy had no drive. No reason to make it work. (*Memento*, 2000)

All those resources he relies on to keep a logical order in his life are indeed a coping mechanism for his brain injury, that is, they make it easier to bear. To some extent, that is no longer the main problem for Leonard. The issue for him is what he remembers because of this condition. The brain injury does not seem to be a relevant annoyance, but more like a challenge. He was used to being challenged constantly when he worked

as an investigator so one may say that adversities have always been part of his life. Nonetheless, as I just mentioned, what returns to his mind, the memory of his wife, is what really hurts him. As a result, I suggest that one should interpret Leonard's trauma as an experience in which his brain damage and his emotional wound are linked and interwoven. He has successfully achieved a method to cope with a life where new memories cannot be created, but he has yet to manage how to live with the constant image of his dying wife. As a result, his main motivation is to find the murderer and execute him rendering his tattoos (F05) and notes (F06) not only methods to live a regular life but also self-directed clues to find that man. In other words, both the brain injury and the traumatic memory are unavoidably united.



F05



F06

Now that the traumatic experience has been totally defined, I shall assert that Leonard does present a traumatic response, but it is not a usual one. After the traumatic experience is suffered, Leonard's brain is shattered, making him unable to make new memories. Thus, the period of time in which he lives normally, his present moment, could be identified as the period of latency. As for the emotional response, I would strongly consider the remembrance of the traumatic memory and the subsequent emotional pain as the reaction. To put it simply, the trauma is experienced as a vicious circle, which is certainly complicated, but it is the same way he is living his life, anyway.

Cathy Caruth also examines some of Jacques Lacan's notions regarding trauma theory issues. I am particularly intrigued by the way he approaches one of Freud's dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) (Caruth 1996: 92). In regard to that particular dream in which a father dreams about his dead son informing him that he is indeed burning next room, Lacan cunningly infers the mourning father's identity from the inability to understand the painful death of his son. So, as Caruth puts it, "what the

father cannot grasp in the death of his child, that is, becomes the foundation of his very identity as father" (Caruth 1996: 92). Consequently, I think it is fair to say that Leonard finds himself in a similar situation.

TEDDY: You don't have a clue, do you? You don't even know who you are.

LEONARD: Yes, I do. I don't have amnesia. I remember everything right up until the accident. I'm Leonard Shelby, I'm from San Francisco...

TEDDY: That's who you were. You don't know who you are, who you've become since the incident [...] (*Memento*, 2000)

Despite exploiting Leonard's condition for his own profit, Teddy is absolutely right when uttering that Leonard is not really himself since the accident. In the same manner that in Freud's dream the identity of the father is constituted by him not fully understanding the death of his child, Leonard's current identity is entirely based on the trauma of the murder of his wife and all the mysteries that surround that terrible event. Thus, one may affirm that trauma does shape identity. Professor Melania Terrazas and Professor José Díaz-Cuesta did also showcase how a traumatic experience can take over a person's identity during the seminar "Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Literature and Film" at the University of La Rioja. Their analysis of the film texts *The Butcher Boy* (1997) and *Calvary* (2014), respectively, represent deeply traumatized individuals that find in their painful experiences a new reason to live, that is, their identities are constituted by their traumas. Both *The Butcher Boy's* Francie Brady and *Calvary's* Jack Brennan are characters that have gone through dreadful events as youngsters and, as a result, their minds are so damaged that they seek some sort of revenge, an attempt to give closure (Herman 1997: 189). In both cases, the characters commit murder, which is exactly the same goal Leonard has. His identity has been redesigned and he could now be considered as just a man that wants retaliation. Vengeance becomes an inherent trait in Leonard; it has grown to be the last phase in his quest. His intentions are clear, and he is entirely open to communicate with whom will listen to him.

2.1.2. *Communicating trauma*

Traumatic experiences, as I already have pointed out, are neither lived nor remembered in the same way as a normal event. They break the mould and escape from understanding. It is the traumatized individual's task to exert himself to rearrange those memories. Leonard is able to remember the traumatic experience with extraordinary accuracy, but the memory of the catastrophe does not only include the overwhelming event but also what is left to understand from it, its lack of integration into consciousness (Caruth 1995: 152). Trauma, therefore, is not only what you live but also what you had not understood from what you have just lived, for its occurrence, as stated by Caruth, "defies simple comprehension" (1995: 153).

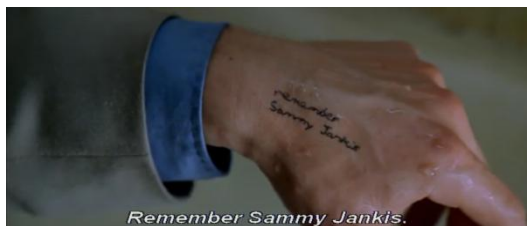
What Onno van der Hart and Bessel van der Kolk postulate in Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* is that in the successful integration of unassimilated traumatic experiences into the normal parameters of memory the victim must transform them into narrative language (1995: 176). Communication, thus, is a must when trying to overcome the pain and heal the emotional wound, for it helps the individual to understand what had happened. In spite of having a limited access to the absolute truth, Leonard communicates everything that he knows, including the catastrophic event, that is, his trauma. To do so successfully, direct speaking about the matter is not enough. Leonard is conscious of the fact that to make people understand what is tormenting him, he must start from the very beginning: Sammy Jankis.

One of the most distinctive tattoos Leonard has is in his left hand and states "Remember Sammy Jankis". The audience is introduced to this tattoo in the first scene of the black and white sequences in an extreme close up shot (F07). This strategy will be used several times (F08 & F09) along the film text, which gives us the impression that it has some particular importance for himself and for the developing of the story. Consequently, "remember Sammy Jankis" is not just one of his tattoos, it is the tattoo, the one that motivates everything. Explaining his own condition requires telling the story of Sammy Jankis first. Even we the spectators carry out the function of listener as we watch these black and white scenes. Everybody seems to have listened to the story about Sammy, for even Teddy affirms so when he says "you tell everybody about Sammy, everybody who'll listen" when confronted by Leonard inside the derelict building. What he tries to do is not only draw a parallel from Sammy to him

representing what anterograde amnesia is and how it affects behaviour but also recalling the past life he had before the event had ever happened.



F07



F08



F09

When Leonard states "I guess I tell people about Sammy to help them understand. Sammy's story helps me to understand my own situation." he affirms that his condition has to be explained through Sammy's. Telling one's own traumatic experiences is indeed a key aspect of the overcoming of that trauma. To do so, the individual must communicate the event "completely, in depth and in detail" (Herman 1997: 175). Leonard makes several references to the assault and the audience must imply that he has thoroughly spoken about it with whoever who may listen. We as viewers also get to witness the event via analepsis in a coloured sequence. Communication, thus, is certainly present, but when dealing with trauma, not everything is transformed into narrative expression as it objectively happened. If the traumatic experience is unassimilated, recalling it as it occurred is plainly unfeasible. Leonard, as a result, is not really telling a trustworthy account of events, but an altered version of the occurrence. Herman assures that the survivor's story is frequently "repetitious, stereotyped and emotionless" (1997: 175), an aspect that can be observed in the way Leonard talks about some aspects of his life, such as his wife:

NATALIE: Tell me about her again.

LEONARD: Why?

NATALIE: Because you like to remember her.

LEONARD: She was beautiful. To me she was perfect.

NATALIE: No, don't just recite the words. Close your eyes and remember her.

LEONARD: You just can feel the details. The bits and pieces you never bothered to put into words. And you can feel these extreme moments even if you don't want to. You put these together and you get the feel of a person, enough to know how much you miss them, and how much you hate the person that took them away. (*Memento*, 2000)

When asked by Natalie about his wife, Leonard responds with a vague prefabricated answer, although that is not what he feels. What he hides within him only comes out if he actually remembers her wife. Herman agrees with Pierre Janet when differentiating two types of memory: normal memory and trauma memory (Herman 1997: 175). The former is the simple account of a story, telling something to somebody, whereas the latter is a much more static narration, in which the affected individual does neither reveal his actual feelings nor his interpretation of the events (Herman 1997: 175). Consequently, one may argue that Leonard's memories and their subsequent narration are still influenced and processed through the emotional filter originated from the traumatic experience.

It is beneficial for Leonard to express himself; recalling the entire story would theoretically help him understand the chunks of information he has missed, those that are reluctant to be placed into normal mental schemes. Nonetheless, however effective this strategy seems to be, its erroneous practice will render it counter-productive. Whether Leonard's memory is to trust is one of the central issues regarding communication. There is a point in expressing something that is not true, though, for him saying so would not help him to understand what actually happened. Sammy Jankis and the inexact remembrance of certain moments in his life are two central elements in the present analysis, for they bring about uncertainty to the figure of Leonard. Despite being the likeable victim that copes with a traumatized psyche, there is room for interpretation from the audience.

2.2. *The role of the audience in Memento*

What Christopher Nolan has forged in *Memento* is a text that necessarily requires the active participation of the viewer throughout the entire story and not only because it demands an effort to reconstruct the timeline but also because the film offers different interpretations. The structure follows a pattern that is as confusing as it gets, and it is up to the audience to work out a proper chronological timeline in an attempt to eventually understand the plot. How the story is presented is, in my opinion as a viewer, one of the most appealing traits of *Memento*. Nolan, though, gives a simple explanation for how he shaped the structure when he was interviewed by *Eyes On Cinema*:

[...] my solution to telling the story subjectively was to deny the audience the same information that the protagonist is denied. And my approach to doing that was to effectively told the story backwards. [...] Both the film [*Memento*] and the short story ["Memento Mori"] [...] alternate between the objective and the subjective. [...] What I did is that I alternated between his colour sequences that are intensely subjective; everything in the colour sequences is from his point of view [...] with these black and white sequences that, at least to begin with, are objective. [...] In the black and white sequences the chronology is forward. [...] As the film progresses, the colour sequences become a little bit less intensely subjective. I think towards the end of the film we really start to step outside his head. [...] The black and white sequences, on the other hand, as the movie progresses, they become less and less objective. [...] (Nolan, 2001)

Eventually, the changing nature of both narrative threads, the black and white sequences and the colour scenes, culminates when they meet towards the end of the movie. At that moment, the audience gets to experience how objectivity and subjectivity are blended as the black and white image smoothly fuses into the coloured one. (F10-F13)



F10



F11



F12



F13

It is undisputedly clear that Nolan wanted the audience to follow Leonard and, to a certain extent, witness life from his point of view. Therefore, it is utterly difficult to disregard him, for our position as his companion has made us empathise with him, because, in the end, we have been forced to be by his side along the story. Moreover, we have even been given the same information he has, making the viewer have the opportunity to feel what is like to be Leonard. However, what he is experiencing is neither an entirely objective nor a totally subjective view of reality, but a clash between them, an unprecedented manner to portray the understanding of the world.

We never wanted to step fully outside his head [...] because to me one of the interesting things about the film [...] is present an idea of the tension between our subjective view of the world, the subjective way in which we have to experience life, and then our faith in an objective reality beyond that. And most movies present a quite comfortable universe where we are given an objective truth [...] In this film we didn't want to do that. [...] We wanted to present the audience with that problem effectively. [...] he can't ever get outside his head and recognize what the objective truth is. (Nolan, 2014)

Leonard being unable to get out his own head entails that he is stuck in a state in which he has not assimilated the overwhelming experience of the death of his wife. That is, his inability to successfully process the traumatic memory into normal mental schemes results in his failure to understand the world. Whereas the black and white sequences represent to some extent factual information, the colour scenes are character-based, and between both sides of the spectrum is where Leonard's mind struggles. Trying to make

sense out of everything is an impossible quest if one does not digest trauma. The narrative structure, consequently, is a representation of trauma victims' vision of the world.

As a consequence of this construction, the audience is unlikely to grasp the essence of the film at once. Non-linear narratives in cinema, especially in the last decades, have been in vogue (Eckel 2013: 278). Christopher Nolan has been one of those authors heavily influenced by this trend, resulting in the creation of several films presenting that particular feature such as the one that I am currently discussing. *Memento* could be interpreted as a "reversed time" narrative, that is, that follows the chronology of time, but in reversed order (Eckel 2013: 281). However, that is only the case of the colour scenes, for the white and black sequences are presented in a strict chronological order. On top of that, both narrative lines are interwoven, which renders the understanding of the plot even more arduous. The viewer struggling to follow the film mirrors Leonard's effort to make sense out of the traumatic experience. Thus, in a way, one as viewer gets to experience to some extent what is like to be Leonard, for we are sharing with him the sensation of being disoriented, we are constant witnesses of what Barry Lewis calls the "erosion of the sense of time" in Postmodernist fiction (2005: 13).

It is also remarkable how deliberately Nolan has created gaps between Leonard's past life, the event, and the present moment that is developed in the film text. The lack of certainty about what happens between these three sections in time – past, traumatic event and present – is meaningful, for it represents two different worlds: the realm of his trauma, and the realm of his regular life (van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 176). What is more, I would suggest that Leonard's life is structured in three sections, namely his normal past, the overwhelming experience, and his current (pseudo)ordinary life in which the effects of trauma are still so vivid that existence cannot return to a state of normality. Either way, what it is clear is that there are missing connections between the three areas of time, which points out at Leonard's incapability to bridge these moments in his life.

It all is reduced to our interpretation of the film text and whom we choose to be trusted. I have postulated that Leonard has indeed been traumatized by a double-edged traumatic experience, which makes sense were we to analyze his condition as he has been telling since the beginning. However, as I previously stated, one has presumed that

Leonard, as he is playing the roles of both victim and vigilante, must be right. Nonetheless, we might choose not to believe him.

There is another interpretation for *Memento* that by no means should go unnoticed as it entails another type of trauma. The story Nolan presents takes on a new light if one decides to believe Teddy. There is little to no doubt that Teddy has been using Leonard for his own profit rendering Leonard victim of his Machiavellian plans for a long time. However, there is a point towards the end of the film in which Leonard has a rude awakening: Teddy wants Leonard to understand that he has been lying to himself since the incident. Nolan himself discusses this issue in an interview with *Filmmaker Magazine*:

The most interesting part of that for me is that audiences seem very unwilling to believe the stuff that Teddy [Pantoliano] says at the end – and yet why? I think it's because people have spent the entire film looking at Leonard's photograph of Teddy, with the caption: "Don't believe his lies." That image really stays in people's heads, and they still prefer to trust that image even after we make it very clear that Leonard's visual recollection is completely questionable. It was quite surprising, and it wasn't planned. What was always planned was that we don't ever step completely outside Leonard's head, and that we keep the audience in that interpretive mode of trying to analyze what they want to believe or not. For me, the crux of the movie is that the one guy who might actually be the authority on the truth of what happened is played by Joe Pantoliano [*The Matrix*, *Bound*], who is so untrustworthy, especially given the baggage he carries in from his other movies: he's already seen by audiences as this character actor who's always unreliable. I find it very frightening, really, the level of uncertainty and malevolence Joe brings to the film. (Nolan, 2001)

Nolan had deliberately configured Leonard as untrustworthy, but the character of Teddy has such an unreliable aura, extolled by Leonard's "don't believe his lies", that he eclipses Leonard. As a consequence, one might adamantly repudiate the possibility of Teddy actually telling the truth at the derelict building. However, this scenario is exceptionally riveting, for it encompasses a novel view on the analysis of *Memento* as the narrative of a trauma.

2.3. Leonard as the culprit of the traumatic experience

Mourning one's trauma is sometimes difficult. The individual may be loath to do so either deliberately or without being conscious about it. It is common, then, that the act of mourning is veiled through other actions different from the usual ones. Were this to happen, it is quite clear that that person's process of recovery has become stale. There are different ways to canalize the resistance to mourning, as stated by Judith Herman, namely forgiveness, compensation or, quite fittingly, revenge (1997: 189). Revenge is seeing as a counterpart for the traumatic memory where victim and criminal change places, a way of giving closure to the torment. However, revenge does not actually work in that way, in fact, it is the other way around. Those individuals who effectively retaliate are the ones who eventually end up dramatically disturbed (Herman 1997: 189). Leonard's quest, therefore, is fruitless, for it will not help him out to get rid of the pain. Even though he states that his wife deserves to be avenged regardless of him remembering, it is revealed that revenge was not the answer, for he already killed the man who broke in his house and assaulted his wife. Teddy tells him they did hunt that man down (F14) as Leonard looks at the picture Teddy took of him right after killing him (F15). Guy Pearce's acting is key in this sequence, for he manages to convey a feeling of remembering; Leonard did it (F16 and F17).



F14



F15



F16



F17

Revenge, then, did not mean anything as he is still searching for a person that he has already murdered.

Moreover, Leonard has always been looking for the wrong person, for the murder of his wife was committed by himself. Teddy breaks the news to him that he has been lying to himself with the intention to refuse to accept what really happened.

TEDDY: So, you lie to yourself to be happy. There is nothing wrong with that. We all do it. Who cares if there's a few little details that you'd rather not remember.

LEONARD: What the fuck are you talking about?

TEDDY: I don't know. Your wife surviving the assault... Her not believing your condition... The torment and pain and anguish tearing her up inside... The insulin...

(*Memento*, 2000)

What Teddy utters is apparently Sammy Jankis story and Leonard is totally aware of that. Teddy, fed up, reveals that Sammy did not have anterograde amnesia, that he was not married, and that the woman who had diabetes was Leonard's wife. To sum up, what Teddy postulates is that Sammy Jankis' story is Leonard's. Was the audience to believe Teddy in this occasion, I would dare to say that the trauma Leonard has is even deeper and intense than the one I have previously discussed.

2.3.1. Dissociation and repression

Leonard has been believing a story that was not true, a narration drafted by himself to avoid any further emotional pain. Sammy Jankis, according to Teddy, is not what Leonard said he was, being Sammy's actions those of Leonard. Trauma theory explains this phenomenon as dissociation, a state in which the trauma survivor keeps the traumatic memory in their mind but separates themselves from it as if another person had gone through it instead of the affected individual. Freud would go a little further stating that dissociation results in double consciousness, that is, a split personality (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 166), and although it seems visually acceptable, I believe dissociation is not so much about dividing one's psyche into several sections but about setting aside the traumatic experience.

Leonard's condition, then, is extremely complicated. He does suffer brain damage, but his inability to create new memories is not physical but psychological. He himself explained that Sammy had "some possible damage in the hippocampus, but nothing conclusive" and that he should have had the physical ability to create new

memories. The first interpretation of trauma in the film revolves around his problem being purely physical, which would then aggravate his psychological wound, but if interpreted in this way, his condition is only psychological. Sammy's mental block mirrors Leonard's and the reason why is because Leonard has projected himself onto Sammy. Sammy Jankis is Leonard Shelby.

The assault in his house was real, and he was traumatized because of it, but there was no dead wife to mourn as she survived. His inability to create new memories dwells in the overwhelming experience of the powerful image of his wife being strangled and the obviously shocking factor of being physically assaulted. From then on, his wife behaved like he said Sammy's wife behaved because he had projected the idea of his wife onto the figure of Sammy's even though Sammy was not married, as stated by Teddy. Consequently, Sammy accidentally murdering his wife due to an insulin overdose is essentially a reflection of Leonard killing his wife. Therefore, when Leonard refers to Sammy Jankis, he is referring to himself in the past. Leonard, as I have already stated, defends that Sammy's story helps him understand his own situation. What he means by that is that is that understanding his past, represented in the figure of Sammy Jankis, he will not make the same mistakes again. Leonard has totally dissociated himself from the traumatic experience in such a great degree that he has even assembled an entire story featuring humans that never existed in the first place. Some experts argue that the process of dissociation occurs while the trauma is taking place (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 168), which is a statement that I agree with. However, Leonard's trauma, in my opinion, is not just the initial assault. I would suggest considering it the cause of a state of commotion, which, to some extent, could also be considered a trauma. It did result in his psychological block, his inability to create new memories, but I think the murder of his own wife is an event that surpasses that occurrence. Taking now into account that any image shown about Sammy and his wife is a mere mirrored image of Leonard's life, I think it is pertinent to examine the scene in which Sammy accidentally kills his wife.



F18



F21



F19



F22

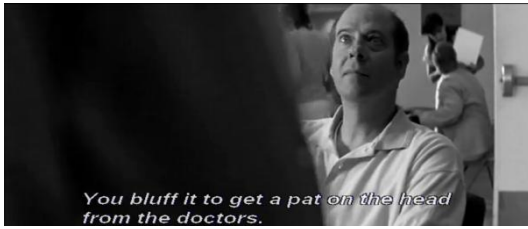


F20



F23

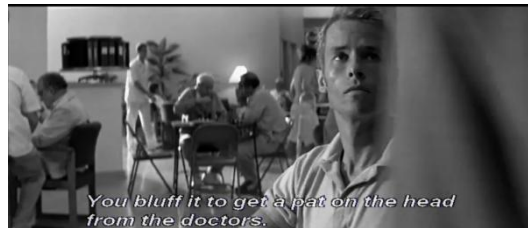
Figures F18, F19 and F20 represent Sammy's wife test which would eventually result in her death. Leonard includes it when he tells the story of Sammy, but what this story stands for is his own story. The account of events, as I have said, has been transferred from himself onto somebody else. The real tragedy, though, is revealed by Teddy towards the end of the film (F21 - F23). Sammy did not end up in a mental institution as Leonard has always claimed because he had faked his condition. As Leonard tells that Sammy was hospitalized, the audience gets to watch, for a brief moment, how Leonard is who appears in that home instead of Sammy (F24 - F26).



F24



F25



F26

This sequence could be understood as a way of showing an empathetic Leonard that pities another man who suffers from the same condition as he does, but what it really means is that we have been allowed to see Leonard's repressed subconscious, that is, what really happened. In spite of dissociating himself from the tragedy, the core of the story, the events, are truthful, and, as a consequence, the complete truth has been shown for a couple of seconds. This interpretation would match Jonathan Nolan's short story "Memento Mori", the literary work that inspired the film text. Earl, the character in the short story, is initially presented in a hospital, but, as the plot progresses, he manages to escape, get tattooed, and eventually get revenge, which is presumably the same path Leonard has gone through. According to van der Kolk and van der Hart, dissociation happens at the same time as the traumatic experience, so one must accept that Leonard's version of Sammy is born right after he realizes he has killed his wife. Therefore, the idea of his impediment being originated from the overwhelming experience of the assault is shattered. I affirm so because Leonard is able to remember the murder of his wife, which would come after the initial assault. In other words, a more painful experience has overshadowed a less harmful one. In spite of remembering it, his inability to create new memories is reactivated right after he kills his wife. That experience, consequently, has somehow found a breach in his psyche and has become deeply embedded within his mind, so much so, that he has separated himself from it despite being able to make an account of the actions that occurred.

There is, however, an aspect that contradicts to some extent this vision of the issue as he seems to be in agreement on the fact that dissociation does not seem to be an active process (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 168; Schmid, 2004: 6). According to this view, the trauma survivor is automatically removed from the scene and substituted by a surrogate, in this case, Sammy Jankis. However, I think that there is some sort of intentionality in Leonard's behaviour. While I agree that the projection of the Sammy Jankis story may be automatic, he does voluntarily separate himself from the experience. Although Freud talked about "dissociation" and "repression" as part of the same, I quite agree with the mental separation of both terms. Dissociation, as I have argued, is basically the projection of another being that bears the experience instead of the survivor. In this way, and as van der Kolk and van der Hart point out, one may refer to it as a horizontal movement. Repression, though, works vertically, that is, from the conscious to the unconscious (1995: 168). Teddy points out that Leonard only remembers what he wants to, representing how effectively Leonard has repressed certain memories. His wife surviving the assault, her being diabetic, him killing the criminal a long time ago or him getting rid of the twelve pages that are missing in the police are fundamental pieces of information that he has chosen to repress. When confronted with the truth, he would show an expression of recognition (F27), of actually remembering. By means of the talk in the derelict building, Teddy successfully makes those memories go back up to Leonard's conscious. Leonard, however, stubbornly rejects those memories (F28), projecting them back onto the fictional story of Sammy Jankis. Leonard has a damaged psyche, but he is still competent enough to manipulate himself to believe whatever he wants to.



F27



F28

The moment in which he meets Sammy Jankis' wife in his office and tells her that Sammy should be physically able to create new memories never actually happened. What that scene really stands for is a moment of self-analysis for Leonard: Sammy, who

represents his past self, was able to create new memories and the new memory he creates is the death of his wife. His brain was always ready to create them, but his mind was not. Only with an experience that could shake the foundations of his psyche was he capable of acquiring a new memory. Therefore, one could affirm that Leonard does have some control over what he remembers. This, though, should come as no surprise since he has been hinting at it throughout the story. Early in the film, Leonard affirms that habit and conditioning make his life possible, exposing in the process that he has been getting used to whatever he needed at the moment to make his life easier. That is, conditioning does not work as a way to remember everything, but as the solution to repress certain events that he would rather not remember, as I previously stated.

2.3.2. Reliving trauma

Trauma survivors usually experience a wide range of posttraumatic stress disorder related symptoms including the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations (Caruth 1996: 11), hyperarousal (Herman 1997: 35) or constriction (Herman 1997: 42), but one of the most recurrent is that of the intrusive memory of the traumatic experience. Traumatized individuals are usually overwhelmed by unexpected and disturbing images of their trauma, those that could not be assimilated and are still haunting them. Leonard's trauma, according to his own account of events, would be the sight of his wife expiring in front of him. However, he is willing to relive the entire experience. His intentions are never fully known by the audience, but what is presented is pretty obvious: Leonard is voluntarily reenacting the traumatic experience.

Leonard hires a prostitute to act as if she was his wife. She would place some objects (F29) that belonged to his wife around the room as if they were hers. They go to bed (F30) and when he is sleeping, in the middle of the night, she goes to the restroom and slams the door. Leonard wakes up without recent memory (F31) and starts to remember the original assault, the one that actually happened (F32-F34). The experience that he has orchestrated is mirroring the experience of the assault. However, when he eventually opens the door, the moment in which what he saw traumatized him, he finds the prostitute and nothing else (F35), which renders him confused (F36).



F29



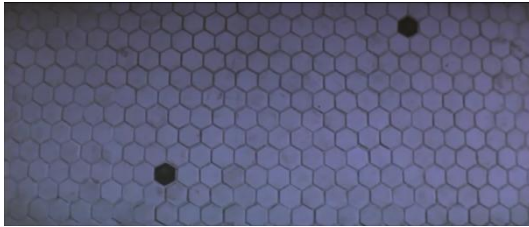
F30



F31



F32



F33



F34



F35



F36

I originally interpreted this scene as Leonard trying to figure out if he would have been in time to prevent the accident from happening to save his wife. However, provided Leonard's system of conditioning himself to remember only what he wants to, another more suitable interpretation dawned on me.

What Leonard pretends to do here is an active dissociation from the assault. He will never forget that event, but he thinks he is able to manipulate his memory to make it more bearable. If his conditioning process is successful, the next time he has the recurrent memory of his wife being choked, he would remember this woman instead of her. This mechanism, however, seems to be unfruitful because of Leonard's reaction to

this reenactment. He grabs her wife's belongings (F37) and proceeds to burn them down (F38).



F37



F38

This sequence is accompanied by a voiceover of Leonard saying "Probably tried this before. Probably burned truckloads of your stuff. Can't remember to forget you." It is in this last sentence, "I can't remember to forget you", where one can witness where Leonard is failing. In his brutal attempt to delete and substitute memories, Leonard has tried to get rid of the figure of his wife as the mere act of remembering her is excruciatingly painful. However, Leonard's conditioning is successful to a limited extent, for he cannot manipulate his mind to forget his wife. "I can't remember to forget you", as a result, can be explained as "I tried to condition myself to believe that you did not exist to alleviate my sorrow, but I am incapable". Therefore, I must again agree with van der Kolk and van der Hart on the involuntary nature of the processes of dissociation. Leonard has somehow managed to lie to himself in some aspects, but the core of his trauma, having killed his own wife, cannot be deleted from his subconscious. The survivor of a trauma cannot choose how to react to it as experiencing such a baffling event pulverizes all the normal standards of human understanding.

3. Conclusion

Why trauma and why now is a question I am asked quite often, especially because of the complicated and confusing nature of this scope of knowledge. "If not now, then when?" is one of the answers I usually give, not as a way to magnify and worship the need for the study and development of Trauma Theory, which would selfishly praise the present dissertation in the process, but as a manner to break the misconceptions surrounding trauma and trauma survivors.

The human race is now in a position from which one can look back at the past to remember tragedies in detail and with enough information. The War of Vietnam, the Holocaust and 9/11 are just some of the many traumatic collective experiences that have shocked the psyche of both individuals and worldwide society. But it is now that we can look at them from a distance, after decades of the wound being open that we are entitled to penetrate and collect the information required to eventually help the survivors to retake an anguish-free life. Before all the aforementioned events occurred, traumatic experiences were still the order of the day, being the processes of colonisation in Africa and America perfect examples of massive collective tragedies before they started to affect the Western world directly. Trauma, as I have explained, does affect individuals in particular as well. I am of the opinion that we are still not totally aware of the significance of trauma and the aftermath, which renders the scope of trauma theory a must. Both individuals and societies have been aching from emotional injuries for centuries, and, thus, my question "If not now, then when?" speaks for itself, for the time is now. On the whole, the analysis of trauma, quite frankly, has been long-overdue.

Fortunately, art has presented itself in its multiple dimensions as a way to present trauma. Subsequently, one may look at art and analyse how trauma materializes in a novel, a painting or a film text, in an attempt to unravel the mysteries surrounding the issue. Eventually, we might find and understand something new that could hopefully contribute to the development of a more solid file of knowledge. Diverse works portray different traumatic experiences. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* deals with the horror of 9/11, Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* addresses the traumatic postcolonial aftermath in Antigua, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus: a survivor's tale* revolves around the Holocaust, just to name a few. Nolan's *Memento*, in my view, is a majestic representation of individual psychological trauma.

My dissertation dealing with *Memento* is not just the quest for validation and acceptance of trauma theory as a respectable and efficient field of knowledge on its own but also the process of vouching for the interpretation of the film text as the narrative of a trauma above all, rather than just a crime drama typical of the film noir genre. In spite of lacking, as Roger Ebert stated in his review of the film, "the usual payoff of a thriller", it does come across as such. However, I must persevere and emphasize how trauma in the character of Leonard is presented. Whether the audience becomes allies with Leonard or decides to disregard him and pay heed to Teddy, *Memento* remains a refined exposition of the character's mental instability and sorrow that can be both understood and explained by means of trauma theory. The film having an open ending, for it seems like Leonard may continue his nonsensical crusade, is not just an interesting narrative mechanism but also an allegory for the wound remaining open. Leonard will never heal and not because he cannot but because he needs to be sempiternally hurt. Had it not been for his ordeal, Leonard would have no purpose in his life. *Memento*, therefore, is also the story of a man whose identity is entirely based on his own trauma, a notion painstakingly addressed at the seminar "Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Literature and Film". Consequently, one may affirm that without trauma, there is no Leonard, and without Leonard, there is no *Memento*.

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