



Memento

(Christopher Nolan, 2000)

Component 2 – Section D: Film Movements – Experimental Film (1960 – 2001)

Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Meaning and response**
- **The contexts of film**

Specialist study areas:

- **Narrative**
- **Auteur**

Rationale for study:

Memento has been described as a “cinematic puzzle box”. It’s a gripping neo-noir psychological thriller, featuring a detective protagonist who suffers from ‘retrograde amnesia’: an inability to create new memories. The film has been critically acclaimed for its non-linear narrative and exploration of the nature of memory, perception and self-delusion. *Memento* was nominated for Best Original Screenplay and Best Editing at the 74th Academy Awards, and in 2017, was selected to be preserved by the US Library of Congress.

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings

Opening sequence(s) In: 00:00
Out: 6:24

Natalie’s Deception In: 1:10:01
Out: 1:17:19

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- *Memento*’s fractured narrative is divided between black and white sequences and those in colour. The black and white scenes are in chronological order and lead up to the events in colour; the colour sequences run in reverse chronology from the opening shot to the end of the film (with some overlapping scenes to help orient the viewer).
- The different coloured sequences have other differences: the black and white scenes show Leonard isolated, performing a monologue (to an unknown character on the phone) which helps to place events from the coloured scenes in context.
- The coloured sequences show Leonard’s interactions with others (especially Teddy and Natalie) and his ‘progress’ with his investigation.

Mise-en-scène

- The film’s coloured scenes use many shades of blue, which adds a nocturnal feel to the events, even when they take place in broad daylight. Leonard’s clothes are also pale blue, as are his eyes – reminding us that everything we see is through Leonard’s perspective.
- Much of the production design is typical of a *neo-noir* detective film. The setting is an unnamed district of Los Angeles, and the sets and locations evoke this seedy neighbourhood: dimly lit bars, anonymous warehouses, and bleak vacant plots.



Image by Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Editing

- Dody Dorn, *Memento's* editor, was nominated for an Oscar. In addition, in 2012, the Motion Picture Editor's Guild voted it the 14th Best Edited Film of all time.
- Even though much of the film's dramatic scenes use conventional match-on-action and shot-reverse shot, the regular switching between the narrative modes often cuts away from the action at a key moment, or back into the 'present' halfway through the action (e.g. when Leonard 'comes to' halfway through an exciting chase scene).
- The balance between confusing jump cuts and conventional film editing means the viewer is immersed in Leonard's perspective, whilst also being able to decode what is happening in the story.
- The device of overlapping the colour sequences is used throughout as a device to orient the viewer. This function takes on extra dimension in the shocking sequence that reveals Natalie's duplicitous character (focus scene 2).

Sound

- Composer and sound designer David Julyan uses the film's audio to also help orient the viewer, and further contrast the black and white and colour sequences. He said he used "*brooding, classical*" tones for the black and white 'flashbacks' and "*oppressive, rumbly*" sound design for the colour scenes.
- Julyan said his aim was to produce one, long 'Leonard's Theme' that reflects the fragmented nature of his identity and story. "*A sense of yearning and loss... but at the same time you don't know what you've lost.*"

Editing

- The film primarily utilises conventional continuity editing; while other areas of film form are expressionistic, continuity editing is used to anchor the more realistic aspects of the film.

Performance

- Critics praised Guy Pearce's performance as Leonard, grounding the narrative complexities in human emotion. His performance combines grief and vulnerability with the toughness required to bluff his way through his confused existence.



- Director Nolan also praised Carrie-Ann Moss and Joe Pantoliano for their ability to bring ambiguity to every scene. He also said that from scene to scene they managed to adopt virtually an entirely different character, depending on how Leonard perceives them at that moment: sometimes helpful and supportive, other times malign and manipulative.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 – STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

Representations

- Numerous neuroscientists have praised the film's depiction of mental health and memory disorders. This is unusual, as often professionals dismiss Hollywood's treatment of mental illness as sensationalistic or wholly inaccurate (see the criticism of *Split*, 2016). Esther M Sternberg, a director at the National Institute of Mental Health said *Memento* was "a close to perfect exploration of the neurobiology of memory."
- In terms of representations of gender, the portrayal of women is fairly stereotypical. Similar to the female characters in other Nolan films, the female characters seem to follow *film noir* conventions: the drug-addicted sex worker, the dead wife who must be avenged, the duplicitous *femme fatale* (Natalie).
- The portrayal of men is more complex. On the surface, Leonard is a typical tough-but-flawed hero, but he is also confused, vulnerable and unstable. He could be seen as an example of 'toxic masculinity': prone to bouts of violence he can't rationalise, and often 'awakens' halfway through. To rationalise these incidents, he deludes himself that he's on a noble quest to avenge his wife.
- Most of the characters in *Memento* are adult, in their mid-thirties or approaching middle age. This age group is represented as having had complex relationships and life experiences. Both Leonard and Natalie are wounded by events in their past. Leonard's condition could also be seen as a metaphor for the way adults edit and reinterpret their past experiences.

- In terms of representations of ethnicity, the cast are all White, with no Black or Hispanic characters. This is odd considering the setting is Los Angeles, a city renowned for its ethnic and cultural diversity! One explanation may be that the majority of the production was shot in Montreal, Quebec.

Aesthetics

- The film references many *film noir* and *neo-noir* aesthetic conventions. The black and white sequences show the protagonist isolated and trying desperately to piece things together. These scenes refer back to films like *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), where a lone hero tries to piece together clues in a hostile world. The colour scenes more closely resemble the modern innovations around these conventions, especially films like *Drive* (2011), or those of Michael Mann (*Thief*, *Heat*). The blue colour palette especially references the aesthetic of the latter.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 – STARTING POINTS: Contexts

Institutional

- *Memento* is based on a short story by Christopher Nolan's brother, Jonathan. Christopher wrote a draft of the screenplay in linear order, then rearranged it into the plot structure of the final script.
- Nolan's wife, producer Emma Thomas, showed the script to executives from Newmarket Films, who said the script was "amongst the most innovative" they'd seen. Shooting began with a budget of \$9 million.
- One of the most complicated scenes to shoot was the opening 'reverse' sequence, said Nolan: "An optical to make a backwards running shot forwards, and the forwards shot is a simulation of a backwards shot."



Cultural

- The ‘puzzle box’ movie or TV show has become a popular subgenre of the mystery/thriller. The title refers to the viewer not merely being entertained by a text, but rather consuming it in ‘interpretive mode’ – piecing together enigmatic events and clues to create their own version of what they think is happening in an ambiguous narrative. Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950) is one of the first examples in cinema. Recently long form TV drama such as *Lost* (2004–10) and *Dark* (2017–20) have also popularised the subgenre.
- Memento* could also be seen as part of the Postmodern film movement (1990–2001). Postmodern films often have non-linear, elliptical (key scenes seem omitted) or ambiguous narratives. These require the viewer to make their own interpretations, constructing a version of the plot for themselves. *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) and *Donnie Darko* (Kelly, 2001) are other good examples.

Social/Political

- During *Memento*’s 20th anniversary re-release, many critics commented on the increased relevance of the film’s themes. In a so-called ‘Post-Truth Age’ of online disinformation, distortion and ‘fake news’, *Memento*’s protagonist’s quest for an elusive and unreliable ‘truth’ becomes remarkably pertinent.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA – STARTING POINTS: Narrative

- The complex and fractured narrative structure of *Memento* is one of its main features. The film is unusual in its very clear delineation of **plot** and **story**. In conventional films (especially in Classical Hollywood style), events happen in a linear, chronological order, and are usually seen from an objective point of view. The story (what has happened) and plot (how we are told about it) unite and build to a clear conclusion. In an experimental narrative like *Memento*, the events of the story (what has happened) are challenged and disrupted by the plot (in this case, how the protagonist is subjectively experiencing events). The viewer is unsure at what point the story ‘ends’ and the conclusion is open and ambiguous.

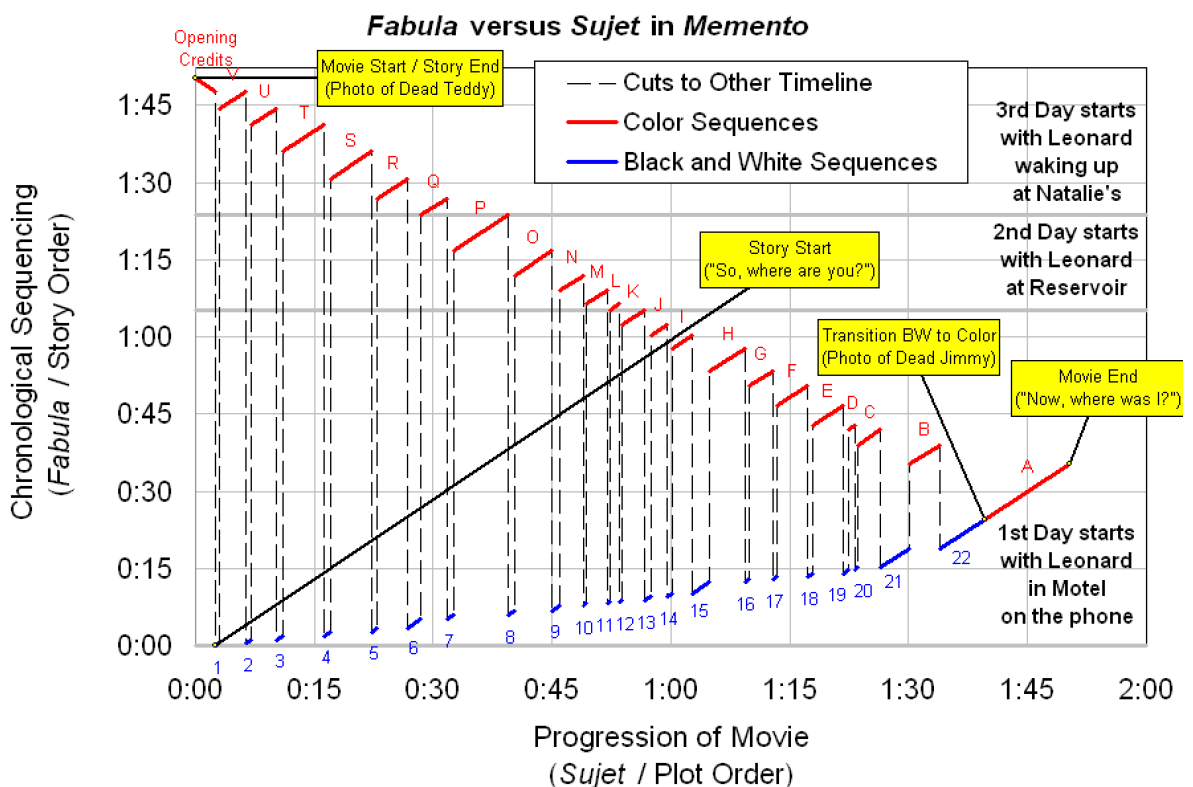


Image by Dr Steve Aprahamian / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0



- The story events in colour are told in reverse order; but they are intercut with a different, apparently isolated scenario (filmed in black and white), that features Leonard in a hotel room explaining to an unknown person on the phone the nature of his condition and his investigation. We are unsure where and when in the story this section is taking place.
- To further complicate matters, the black and white sequences are intercut with an adjacent narrative (Sammy Jankis and his wife). Later revelations make us question whether this story is accurate – and if not, whether anything Leonard has told us in these sequences is authentic.
- Some DVD/Blu-ray editions have the option of watching the narrative in chronological, forward progression to aid audiences. In 2019, Dr Steven Aprahamian devised a complex and challenging diagram to map out the structure. See below:
- Despite this, there are recurrent themes and character types. The protagonists are often “men who believe they are in control, only to learn control is an illusion;” they are often traumatised and haunted by a lost loved one; and they are tormented by a manipulative antagonist.
- Often, the concept of linear chronology is questioned and disrupted, even in apparently realistic films (e.g. *Dunkirk*).
- Nolan also regularly uses physical symbols as part of the narrative. Good examples are Leonard’s Polaroids and tattoos; the spinning ‘totem’ in *Inception*; the magical top hat in *The Prestige*. Often, these items have a meaning that tries (unsuccessfully!) to pin down what is real and what is imagined.
- *Memento*, like many of Nolan’s films, is about the search for an objective ‘truth’ that remains elusive to both protagonists and the viewer – particularly in *Inception*, where the line between dream and reality is unclear, most famously in the final shot. This ambiguity intellectually engages the viewer – but it also ensures each film’s legacy, with many fans continuing to discuss their interpretations decades after the original release.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA – STARTING POINTS: Auteur

- The phrase *auteur* (author) was popularised by the French New Wave in the 1960s. It describes filmmakers that have a very distinctive ‘voice,’ and who display a significant level of creative control over their work. They repeatedly explore similar themes or issues or feature unusual motifs or other aesthetic features.
- One trait of an *auteur* is the ability to retain a distinctive ‘signature’ despite making films in a range of different genres. Christopher Nolan is a good example. He has made blockbuster superhero movies (his *Dark Knight* trilogy, 2005–12), period pieces (*The Prestige*, 2006), big budget intellectual science fiction (*Inception*, *Interstellar*, *Tenet*) and even a World War II film (*Dunkirk*, 2017).



KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS:

Opening sequence(s) In: 00:00 Out: 6:24

- The first two and half minutes could be seen as the entire film's narrative in microcosm: a Polaroid of a dead body fades and is slotted back into a camera; blood rivulets drip backwards; a bullet returns to a pistol muzzle. This reverse sequence introduces to the viewer what (part of) the narrative structure will involve.
- The opening shot of the Polaroid photo is also a potent symbol for Leonard's condition: the solid, objective world (photos are often evidence of a 'truth') that gradually fades away into nothing. This use of a single prop for symbolism is typical of Christopher Nolan.
- In a film packed with enigmas – Leonard's whole existence seems to be lunging from one enigma to another – the opening two and half minutes establish the key questions: Who has been killed? Why? Who is the man who killed him?
- It then goes on to deftly answer these enigmas with a black and white scene and the next colour scene where we see Leonard and Teddy drive to (what we realise) is the murder site.
- The scene in the motel and dialogue also establish that Leonard is not a character we should pity. His condition is challenging, but in his first exchanges with Teddy we see that he is alert, clear and has methods to compensate. These skills are initially impressive – but as the narrative develops, we realise any misinterpretation of his 'mementos' will have deadly consequences.
- Leonard has scratches on his face, his suit is rumpled (make-up and costume), plus his car has a smashed window (prop) which creates more enigmas. The prop of the Polaroid with Teddy's face on first seems to establish this character as a friend of Leonard. However, this meaning is inverted when we see on the reverse of the photo it tells Leonard (and the audience) not to trust Teddy – and to kill him.
- After Leonard attacks Teddy, the dialogue suggests answers to some of the initial enigmas (Who is Leonard? Why is he doing this? Why does he kill Teddy?) – yet raises many more (What's in the basement? What has Leonard 'become'? Who is Teddy *really*?). This is an inversion of the conventional climax to a mystery-thriller, where the villain is identified and brought to justice, with all narrative threads resolved.
- Teddy's dialogue also introduces key themes of the film: identity, memory, self-delusion and elusive nature of 'truth'.
- Leonard shoots Teddy and the familiar shot informs us this is where the last colour scene ended. This establishes the rhythm and structure of the ensuing sequences and helps orient the viewer.