

Intermédialités

Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques

Intermediality

History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies

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Numéro 42, automne 2023

tromper
deceiving

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109849ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1109849ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Revue intermédialités

ISSN

1705-8546 (imprimé)

1920-3136 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Leblanc, J. (2023). An Inquiry into Self-Deception: *Memento*, Truth-Display, and the Detective Genre. *Intermédialités / Intermediality*, (42), 1–20.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1109849ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article propose une analyse du concept de trahison dans le film *Memento* (2000) de Christopher Nolan. En étudiant les sens dans une approche sémantico-philosophique, l'aveuglement volontaire du protagoniste conceptualise une tromperie au tenant d'un paradigme sociojudiciaire qui comprend la perception du réel comme vérité acquise par le sens de la vue. Les apparences trompeuses interrogent le mécanisme d'un déplacement visuel et conceptualisent la structure de l'histoire comme métarécit du genre policier.

An Inquiry into Self-Deception: *Memento*, Truth-Display, and the Detective Genre

JULIETTE LEBLANC

Panopticom
Won't you show us what's going on?
Panopticom
So how much is real?¹

INTRODUCTION



Figure 1. Juliette Leblanc, *La projection*, Film photography, from my personal archives, Montreal, 2019.

1. Peter Gabriel, “Panopticom”, *Le Monde*, Paroles2chansons, [2023], <https://paroles2chansons.lemonde.fr/paroles-peter-gabriel/paroles-panopticon.html> (accessed 10 February 2023).

When Jeremy Bentham proposed the idea of a circular prison in 1791, he called it the Panopticon. By placing one all-seeing guard in a central tower, the hypothetical structure allows constant, simultaneous surveillance of all the prisoners placed in individual cells around a watchtower. In Greek mythology, Argus (Argos) Panoptes was the one hundred-eyed giant guarding the transformed Io for Hera, with *panoptes* meaning in Greek “All seeing.”² Much later, Michel Foucault described such a prison in “‘Panopticism’ from Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison”:

By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. [...] Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.³

As problematized by Stephen Crites in his article *The Aesthetics of Self-Deception*⁴, self-deception is a paradox at the crux of experience: “the human propensity for self-delusion is rooted [...] in the very formation of experience.”⁵ Self-deception can be seen as a *dédoublement*, a split between two stories: “I should prefer to say that two different renderings of experience can co-exist in a single consciousness; let us call this the double-storied type of self-deception.”⁶ Likewise, this essay is formed around a general understanding of self-deception as a two-folded phenomenon.

Specifically, this article proposes an inquiry into self-deception in Christopher Nolan’s psycho-thriller film *Memento* (2000). The movie follows the trail of Leonard, a self-proclaimed detective who is searching for the man responsible for killing his wife. The catch is, he can’t make new memories and needs to rely on external “mementos” he creates for himself (Polaroid photos, tattoos). There is also a cop named Teddy who

2. “Argus”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 27 December 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Argus-Greek-mythology> (accessed 31 August 2023).

3. Michel Foucault, “‘Panopticism’ from Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison,” *Race / Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2008, p. 5.

4. Stephen Crites, “The Aesthetics of Self-Deception”, *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1979, vol. 62, no. 2, 1979, p. 107–129.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

is trying to help him and who ends up being killed by Leonard in the end. The story of *Memento* is foggy at best.

At first, there seems to be two timelines, one in black-and-white and one in colour. The black-and-white scenes picture Leonard in a hotel room, talking on the phone to an unknown person. Crites's "doubled-storied" definition sheds an interesting light on these paralleled scenes.⁷ Trying to get his story straight, Leonard can be seen as dialoging with himself, between two lines of consciousness. The timeline in colour is where the action takes place. There is Leonard's account of the murder of his wife and Leonard's account of a client, Sammy Jenkins, he once had as an insurance investigator. The client also had memory issues, but it is revealed that Leonard rejected his insurance claims, causing Sammy Jenkins's wife to try and bring back Sammy's memory by letting him lethally inject her with insulin.⁸ The timeline is, furthermore, disorganized to accentuate Leonard's confusion and gives the events of this story a reverted chronology. A sequenced narrative of what appears to him to be episodes of clarity, the linear structure of the in-colour story proves to be backward and runs parallel to the black and white story, accentuating the main character's lack of continuity. The first scene of the movie is also the last scene, and each scene in-between is cut short, as affected by the same impending forgetfulness of Leonard's condition.

Following Crites definition, the self-deceiver also needs an audience: "In order to deceive myself I must enlist the complicity of others, however passive or unwitting their complicity may be."⁹ This renders it possible to position self-deception within the aesthetic means of cinema. As we will show here, Leonard's self-deception is media informed, it is a self-display. What does Leonard's self-deception mean for the modern viewer? I propose to look at three various and unrelated authorities aesthetically informed by vision: the detective genre, the study of the senses, and the iconographic and semantic modelling of meaning making. What is more, Crites imbricates our notion of self-deception with its means: "experience does not take form until such

7. "The story that cannot be faced is the real story, in the sense that it continues to assert itself in motivating one's course of action, with the more acceptable scenario constantly being put forward as a cover story to rationalize the course of action." *Ibid.*, p. 126.

8. Crites denotes three types of self-deception: one where the cover story hides the shameful real story; one where the cover story hides the too-good-to-be-true real story; and lastly a type where the cover story hides the fact that there is no story at all. *Ibid.*, p. 126–127. It can be argued that *Memento* uses both the first and last type of cover story, but also that the true story might make him out to be Sammy Jenkins. For the aims of the present article, this avenue will not be explored.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

sensory materials find their aesthetic structure.”¹⁰ In that regard, *Memento* weaves for us the *dédoublement* of truth in self-deception, informed by the specific aesthetic perception of a truth paradigm informed by sight.

Between deception and perception, a collection of various anthropological studies by pioneer scholar Nadia C. Seremetakis called *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*¹¹ drives me to present the senses as leading the internal mechanics of an aesthetic of justice informed by the sense of vision and by the evolution of technology. And this, because the detective genre goes deeper than entertainment value; it gives a pulse, a continuous, ever-changing representation of what we consider challenges of order (crimes).

Helped by Friedrich Nietzsche’s short essay *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*,¹² I propose that Leonard’s impossibility to question his system relates to the foundational bases of power to signify but also to the necessity for metaphorical truth. By deceiving the viewer with a mind-tricking narrative, the film underlines the deceptiveness of story building. The representation of memory in mementos extends the self *outside* the self, in a crisis of representation. Akin to semiotics, the reasoning of the protagonist follows symbols, which places Leonard in a long line of detectives.¹³ To trick meaning into an illusion of form, the self-deception further translates to semantic deception, where the appearance of self of the protagonist turns to self-displacement: “The liar is a person who uses the valid designations, the words, in order to make something which is unreal appear to be real.”¹⁴

This analysis also follows from scholar Maurizio Ascari’s work that sees crime fiction as informed by the evolution of technology and as springing from the inter-relatedness of all its sub-genres: “The truth is that the detective story, along with the police story, the spy story and the thriller, all of them immensely popular in the past

10. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

11. C. Nadia Seremetakis (ed.), *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* [1996], New York, Routledge, 2019.

12. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” [1873] in Daniel Breazeale (ed.), *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the Early 1870’s*, Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1993.

13. For rapprochement between semiotic and detection, see also: Umberto Eco (ed.), *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce: Advances in Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, 1983 and Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” *Theory and Society*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1979 p. 273–288.

14. Nietzsche, [1873] 1993, p. 81.

twenty years, makes up part of the hybrid creature we call sensational literature.”¹⁵ In and of itself, *Memento* is the narrative equivalent of a field trip into the power dynamic of a socio-visual complex. In this story of self-deception, the exercise of narrative is to police the self. In this case, Leonard’s system parallels the detective story and appears as a metaphysical inquiry into what it really means to reveal the truth.

LEONARD’S SYSTEM: EVOLUTION OF TRUTH-MAKING

In *Memento*, Leonard’s own truth system is self-deceptive. The story centers around the search for revenge of a protagonist who has been left unable to make new memories after a head injury caused during his wife’s murder. On the trail of the supposed assassin, he avoids being side-tracked by his anterograde amnesia by following and trusting an extensive set of annotated polaroid photographs, a map, and multiple facts tattooed across his body. This system is what he deems the capital difference between him and Sammy Jenkins, his character’s failed double afflicted with the same condition: “You really do need a system if you’re gonna make it work.”¹⁶

Leonard’s system represents any system of order that maintains coercion, power, and its own sense of justice: “I’m disciplined and organized.”¹⁷ Those “mementos” serve not only as reminders, they also incarnate the following steps in his reasoning and take the place of new thoughts. In her article “Postmodern Narrative or Narrative of the Postmodern? History, Identity, and the Failure of Rationality as an Ordering Principle in *Memento*” Rosalind Sibielski parallels his system with the rationale of truth in the age of reason:¹⁸ demonstrable, empirical knowledge. In Leonard’s own explanation: “The cops don’t catch a killer by sitting around remembering stuff. They collect facts, they make notes, and they draw conclusions. Facts, not memories. That’s

15. Julian Symons, “Bloody Murder: from the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: a History” [1972], quoted in Maurizio Ascari, *A Counter-history of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 173.

16. Christopher Nolan, *Memento*, 2000, 7:00.

17. *Ibid.*, 16:44.

18. “Often referred to as the ‘Age of Reason’, this period saw scientific discovery and rational observation begin to replace Christianity as the dominant discourse for ordering and understanding [...] resulting in an idealized program of individual emancipation through knowledge,”; Rosalind Sibielski, “Postmodern Narrative or Narrative of the Postmodern? History, Identity, and the Failure of Rationality as an Ordering Principle in *Memento*,” *Literature and Psychology*, vol. 49, n° 4, 2004, p. 83.

how you investigate.”¹⁹ And when he explains his motives, his desire for revenge seemingly points back at this system: “Me? Yeah I got a reason.”²⁰

Following the idea of a factual truth-making system, it is also important to introduce an understanding of the genre in literary studies: that the evolution of the detective genre can be viewed to parallel social understanding of truth and is constantly rebranded by the changes in scientific paradigms (social, judicial, criminal).²¹

VISUAL TRUTH: SOCIO-PERCEPTUAL IMPLICATIONS OF DETECTION

In his book *A Counter-history of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational*, Maurizio Ascari argues that detective fiction patterns social ideas of the justice system: “As the English proverb ‘Murder will out’ illustrates, in the Middle Ages—according to popular belief—the primary agent of detection was divine providence.”²² Ascari later credits Foucault’s analysis as underlining: “[...] the power/knowledge nexus, the body of the criminal and the eye of power, that is, the centrality of gaze in various activities of social/individual diagnosis, classification, surveillance and reform.”²³ The modern view is characterised by an order of the visible where Truth exposes crimes.

Detection can be viewed as the common sensorial need for an apparatus of science based on empirical knowledge that aims at visual authority, and this specifically visual paradigm produces two social phenomena: entertainment and surveillance (or to observe and be observed). Crystalizing this view of justice, the truth and its perception center the eye as the organ of truth. As a by-product of sight, the detective story is a story of detection and aims to detect, to make visible.

MEMENTOS OF CINEMA: SYSTEMS OF REPRESENTATION AND THE CRISIS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In “A Defence of Detective Stories” written during the “Golden Age” of detective fiction, Chesterton famously crystalized an image of the police’s contact zone with crime: “unsleeping sentinels who guard the outposts of society [...] we live in an armed camp, making war with a chaotic world, and [...] the criminals, the children of chaos,

19. *Memento*, 2000, 24:00.

20. *Ibid.*, 16:53.

21. Again, one needs only to look at Maurizio Ascari’s line of study: Ascari, 2007.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

are nothing but the traitors within our gates.”²⁴ *Memento* seems at first to anchor itself more in the tradition of the psycho-thriller and the gothic. Both deal with the human mind as the site of inquiry; it is the center of suspense. As such, Leonard’s memory map is concealed in his hotel room, which serves as a representation of his mind. Like in Emily Dickinson’s anxious lines, the battlefield is not the city anymore but a much more personal, criminal space:

The Brain- has Corridors surpassing
Material Place-[...]
Ourself- behind Ourself- Concealed-
Should startle- most-
Assassin- hid in Our Apartment-
Be Horror’s least-.²⁵

But *Memento* poses a bigger challenge to the deceptive-mind dilemma of the gothic space. Let’s consider this excerpt of *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* by Friedrich Nietzsche as a foreboding introduction:

Is he, indeed, ever able to perceive himself completely, as if laid out in a lighted display case? Does nature not conceal most things from him—even concerning his own body— in order to confine and lock him within a proud, deceptive consciousness, [...] And woe to that fatal curiosity which might one day have the power to peer out and down through a crack in the chamber of consciousness and then suspect that man is sustained in the indifference of his ignorance by that which is pitiless, greedy, insatiable, and murderous—as if hanging in dreams on the back of a tiger.²⁶

As will be demonstrated here, the problem is not inside the mind but outside, or inside-out (see Fig. 2).

24. G.K. Chesterton, “A Defense of Detective Stories” [1901], Howard Haycraft (ed), *The Art of The Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*, New York, The Universal Library, 1946, p. 6.

25. Emily Dickinson, “One Need Not be a Chamber to be Haunted,” R. W. Franklin (ed.), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson Variorum Edition*, Cambridge, 1998, <https://poets.org/poem/one-need-not-be-chamber-be-haunted> (accessed 1 February 2023).

26. Nietzsche, [1873] 1993, p. 80.



Figure 2. François Nicolas Chiffart, *La conscience*, Black stone drawing on paper, 61,6 x 47 cm, Maison de Victor Hugo- Hauteville House, Guernesey, 1860-1868.

L'œil était dans la tombe et regardait Caïn²⁷

Intrinsic to the apparatus of power, the apparatus of deception is linked to perception. In her article, Seremetakis tackles the question of consciousness: “The imperceptible is not only the consequence of sensory transformation but also the means by which it takes place [...] [and] the problematic of the senses in modernity resurrects the old theme ignored in recent anthropological theory, that of the historical unconscious.”²⁸ In a paradigm where the dominating sense is that of vision, the unconscious is an under-layer reality, a consciousness to which we are blind. The eye meets perception of surfaces and creates a covering/uncovering bind.

As the famous line of the poem by Victor Hugo “La conscience” manifests, our idea of consciousness has been linked with detective justice and conceptualized in a visible/invisible duality. The human mind can be seen as the deceptive element that needs to be observed, the tomb duplicating the closed space of the criminal’s mind. In *Memento*, this closed space is duplicated outside in the form of the hotel room and on the cinema screen.

The medium of cinema brings us to an important conceptual split in the idea of consciousness and vision, or self-perception: “Crary (1991) has pointed out that a crucial cultural agenda in the division of the senses was the desire for cognition to see itself.”²⁹ In modernity, from the “spectacle” and surveillance appears “the legal criteria of visual evidence”³⁰ and also an ideal of “movies as ‘acts of pure seeing’.”³¹ Similarly, the shift in the technical development of the moving image places the viewer in a state of new mediated presence, a displacement made available particularly in the medium of cinema: “today cinematic objects and seeing ultimately mediate, if not construct, our perception of the real.”³² It begs the question, what do we lose, what do we betray and kill, when *we make visible*?

Taken from various parts of Seremetakis’s collection, these ideas prompt the following questions:

27. Victor Hugo, “La Conscience”, *La légende des Siècles*, t. 1, Paul Berret (ed.), Paris, Hachette, 1920–1927, p. 47–51.

28. Seremetakis, 2019, p. 4.

29. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* [1991] quoted by Seremetakis, 2019, p. 128.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

To what extent is the experience and ideological construction of the social body contingent on technological prosthetics applied to the individual body? And to what extent does this enhancing and even surrealizing of the sensory apparatus of the viewer eviscerate and empty the sensory pertinence and subjectivity of the viewed?³³

For Leonard, viewed truth leads to objectification rather than objectivity. His mementos erode and hide his subjectivity even to himself. In his film analysis, Dion Tubrett notes that: “*Memento* is so disturbing because it extends identification without identity.”³⁴ The self, made of mementos, is a de-centered self, meaning it is not a sensing self. Throughout the whole movie, Leonard faces his displaced sense of self: “So, where are you?” The final scene mirrors the disorientation of the opening scene: “Now, where was I?” In his discontinuity, Leonard needs to put himself back into place. But when his mementos *take the place* of his memory, they create another sort of displacement.

In a way, Leonard’s self-deception comes from a self *displaced* or *self-display*. This can be viewed as a crisis of representation, where the awareness is not on truth itself but on its attachment to outside elements, its representation: “We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I’m no different.” In this case, his sense of identity is mirrored by a re-moved self. His overt cognition decollates his insides and leaves him dis-embodied. More specifically, Seremetakis proposes that:

Realism is legitimized by the capacity to subject perception and the senses to an objectivizing dissection: the instrumental seeing of perception. [...] The scientific and economic partitioning of the senses became the symbolic by which sensory reality, and hence, everyday life experience is to be apprehended and recorded.³⁵

This capacity for external projection cuts the self-*outside* the self. And she warns us of these consequences on our collective imagination: “These diverse acts of embodiment carry with them an inheritance of the senses that we have not yet come to terms

33. Allen Feldman, “From the Desert Storm to Rodney King via ex-Yugoslavia: On Cultural Anaesthesia,” quoted by Seremetakis, 2019, p. 130.

34. Dion Tubrett, “‘So Where Are You?’ On *Memento*, Memory, and the Sincerity of Self-Deception,” *CineAction*, n° 56, 2001, p. 10.

35. Seremetakis, 2019, p.128.

with.”³⁶ Divided and replaced, Leonard’s sense of self and memories are displayed in his mementos but also on the cinema screen that projects his self-deception.

His self-deceptiveness comes about by an act of interpretation and rearrangement of external facts that briefly points in Nietzsche’s direction: “Insofar as the individual wants to maintain himself against other individuals, he [...] employ[s] the intellect mainly for dissimulation.”³⁷ Positioned against himself by the leap of his outward representation, he becomes a stranger to himself. In this timeframe, Leonard is hanging upside down... “on the back of a tiger.”³⁸

THE PAST: PARADOX OF NARRATIVES

Leonard’s system is his guarantee to truth and his safeguard against forgetfulness. But his condition is not amnesia, it is the incapacity to make new memories or what we could see as narrative progress. The fundamental actualization of past truth, in the form of mementos that he must constantly interpret because of his condition, leaves Leonard consciously displaced. What does this mean for the narrative itself?

In reality, it is Leonard himself who appears to be manipulating his memory. The ending reveals that Leonard already killed the suspected murderer but manipulates the facts to protect himself from an impossible resolution. Faced with the fear of a senseless ending, Leonard keeps attributing meaning to his mementos to lead himself into believing that his friend-turned-foe Teddy is the killer. This moment is decisive. It is then that Leonard clearly decides to manipulate the facts to avert a difficult truth. Following Crites’ definition, it is here that the self-deception most clearly takes place, by “willed ignorance.”³⁹ Accentuating this fundamental moment for the storyline, the sequences turn from past to present. At that moment, the movie turns in on itself as the viewer realizes that the character of the detective has turned out to be the killer, further accentuating the paradox of self-deceivers: “perpetrators and victim at once.”⁴⁰

By hiding the truth, Leonard is still left with the possibility to search for it, which for Crites makes the cover story function “as a secondary growth, constantly

36. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

37. Nietzsche, [1873] 1993, p. 81.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

39. Crites, 1979, p. 125.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

called into play to counter and suppress the real story.”⁴¹ Tricking himself forward onto a constant search in turn renders his deceptiveness a necessary evil for the very condition of the continuation of his belief system: “I have to believe my actions still have meaning even if I can’t remember them.”

The system is made to fit his goal, but truth is already betraying him. When he ultimately tricks himself, the self-deception is embedded using his own code of law or order. As we saw, it is the projection, the mementos he uses as external reminder, that are actually the instruments of his self-deception because they become his only sense of self. And as Teddy points out, his own system starts to say more about him than himself: “That’s not who you are, that’s what you’ve become.”

As a crisis of representation, *Memento* is “both a postmodern narrative and a narrative of the postmodern.”⁴² His sense of self is solidifying an identity transposed by the observation of an illusion of presence. But it is also a temporal crisis of a protagonist stuck in the present of representation: “It’s like waking up. It’s like you just woke up.” It is the fear of a conscience free of the orientation of context: “as ‘heaps of fragments’, a series of perpetual presents which cannot be placed in any kind of narrative context other than their immediate one.”⁴³

Against his faulty memory is placed something far more complex about our understanding of the past:

to historicize an object means that engaged social actors become incarcerated in the cultural authority and allure of the past, unable to encode the present except passively through the lens of what has already occurred. Or can we ask: is even the most hoary authenticating object, ultimately, yet incompletely, torn from its past by the gaze and touch of the present?⁴⁴

By force of this postmodern condition, Leonard cannot make new memories but only dwell on interpreting the old ones. His sequences are upside down, and in this mind-tricking narrative: “the twist at the end reshapes the story of the investigation as

41. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

42. Sibielski, 2004, p. 100.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

44. Annette Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* [1992], quoted in Seremetakis, 2019, p. 137.

well.”⁴⁵ The disclosure of the past that finally emerges at the end of the movie shapes a future that is ultimately *still* the past.

Hinted in its name, *Memento* serves not as the drama of a lost memory but as a reminder of the elusiveness of our mementos, of the fault in our belief systems. Serving as a metanarrative of the frailness of truth-building and the objectivity of its interpretation, the narrator fails to truthfully interpret the order and deliberately manipulates his memory; he deceives himself with a system of truths or facts. This weaving of the facts is the mark of the true deceivers for Crites and mirrors the narrative sequencing of the movie: “deception consists not in changing any of the known or knowable facts, but in shaping the way they are narrated.”⁴⁶ As best we try to follow Leonard through the interspersed scenes, like mementos of his story, only as the true story is disclosed to us do we interpret the protagonist’s actions correctly. The viewer of the movie *Memento* is deceived by a narrative where the end bites the present. Showing narratives as fragile truth, the first-person narrative further accentuates the viewer’s experiences as a warped perception of the world. What we want to believe is ultimately bigger than reality: “Do I lie to myself to be happy? [...] yes, I will.”

FORGETTING MEANING-MAKING

The self-deception produced by his system demonstrates that Leonard lies and deceives with the same system he uses to access his truth. His facts are visually perceived informations whose meanings are deceptive exactly because they need to be displayed and ask that we put our trust in *mediated* truth. What is left from these deceptions is a need to anchor memory as its own truth-making system of representation but also to hide its course: “Just because there are things I don’t remember doesn’t make my actions meaningless.” He writes his own order of events, simultaneously forges and forgets its continuity, and looks back at the past he just recorded for clues of meaning.

His trust is given to facts incarnated in mementos. They in turn signify with meaning like icons telling something with something else. Seremetakis seems also to permit a movement from sense to semiotics: “Forms of sensory depiction and their cultural displacement has to be understood here in its widest sense, including the

45. Cornelia Klecker, “Mind-Tricking Narratives: Between Classical and Art-Cinema Narration,” *Poetics Today*, vol. 34, 2013, p. 138.

46. Crites, 1979, p. 120.

narratives and iconography located within the talking objects of a signifying material culture.”⁴⁷ Regarding Leonard’s system, Sibielski notes this hitch:

Together the signifier and the signified become attached to a particular system of meaning for Leonard, which, in turn, forms the basis for particular threads of knowledge: (1) he himself needs a system based on observation and deductive reasoning in order to understand his external reality and attain a certain measure of control over it; (2) he needs a dependable, systematic method based on reason in order to legitimate his observations as accurate representations of his experience.⁴⁸

In accordance with this new dimension, according to Sibielski, the authority of his system of meaning requires a reading of the semantic argument in Nietzsche’s essay:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.⁴⁹

The represented truth is always a trope, a substitution for something. As another form of order, Leonard permits its constant reconstruction like in Nietzsche’s theory of language where metaphors built on truth create a displacement of meaning. Maybe the problem with his narrative is that truth in mementos is a metaphor, hidden in something else. A sign is something that means *for* something else; it is self-deceptive because *it appears to be*. Leonard is tricked by the meaning pictured in his mementos and they, in turn, visually and metaphorically give him away.

It should be noted that the detective novel also has this tell-tale quality to make visible what is hidden and plays on the line between disclosure and concealment. In his essay *The Typology of Detective Fiction*, Tzvetan Todorov notes that there are two detective stories: “the story of the crime—tells ‘what really happened’, whereas the second—the story of the investigation—explains ‘how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know

47. Seremetakis, 2019, p. 128.

48. Sibielski, 2004, p. 90.

49. Nietzsche, [1873] 1993, p. 84.

about it’.”⁵⁰ This dual nature appears to be the crux of this “puzzle” genre: “How does it happen then that detective fiction manages to make both of them present, to put them side by side?”⁵¹ And what is more, this highly interesting pattern in detective fiction coincides with Crites understanding of a “double-storied”⁵² self-deception.

In our relation to truth-making, Leonard’s role in his self-deception connects to a similar idea of *dédoublement*; where revealing is also hiding. As Teddy reproaches him, he aims: “to create a puzzle [...] [he] could never solve.”⁵³ In other words, his role is split between the two simultaneous movements of both stories: “The first, that of the crime, is in fact the story of an absence [...]”.⁵⁴ The second story is the piecing together of that absence.

A detective in search of the truth, his role is mirrored by his profession as an insurance investigator: “I’d investigate the claims to see which ones were phony [...] it was useful experience ‘cause it’s my life now.”⁵⁵ He judges, and judgement also relates to the senses:

In Greek there is a semantic circuit that weds the sensorial to agency, memory, finitude, and therefore history—all of which are contained within the etymological strata of the senses. The word for senses is *aesthisis*; emotion-feeling and aesthetics are respectively *aesthima* and *aesthitiki*. They all derive from the verb *aesthánome* or *aesthsome* meaning I feel or sense, I understand, grasp, learn or receive news or information, and I have an accurate sense of good and evil, that is I judge correctly.⁵⁶

By observing body language⁵⁷, Leonard trusts his sight more than anything else to detect the lies of his clients; it is an aesthetic of judgement informed by vision. And when looking at *Memento*, the viewer takes part in this same game of authentication and self-deception: “The jury is that same group of individuals who can, [...] through

50. Tzvetan Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction” [1966], Chris Greer (ed.), *Crime and Media*, 1st Edition, Routledge, 2010, p. 296.

51. Todorov, 2010, p. 296.

52. Crites, 1979, p. 126.

53. *Memento*, 2000, 1 :46 :05.

54. Todorov, [1966] 2010, p. 296.

55. *Memento*, 2000, 22 :24.

56. Seremetakis, 2029, p. 5.

57. *Memento*, 2000, 22:50.

persuasion or art, form itself into an audience. The audience suspends its disbelief in order to receive entertainment.”⁵⁸

In the opening scene, Leonard’s hand gently shakes a polaroid showing a dead body. But the familiar movement is reversed, and we witness with unease as the image slowly disappears. What is viewed here by the audience is the uncovering of the act of forgetting and the ordered cover-up of his memory. It is an enigma of absence and happening. And in that gesture alone appears the whole trick of the movie, the deceptiveness of a system of external representation that not only has the power to make visible but also to dissimulate.

Both memory and its narrative are deceptions of the mind; where to keep is to erase, to show is to hide: “It is only by means of forgetfulness that man can ever reach the point of fancying himself to possess a ‘truth’ of the grade just indicated. If he will not be satisfied with truth in the form of tautology, that is to say, if he will not be content with empty husks, then he will always exchange truths for illusions.”⁵⁹

The illusion is cloaked in truth, and when the audience comes to witness Leonard’s own lies, it weakens the structure, the whole edifice of truth built on the tacit accord of the screening. Indeed, as viewers, aren’t they themselves already victims of self-deception?

If the picture is a clue, the representation itself hints at something that is missing, and its presence is an absence. What is our grasp on truth? Truth is a story we tell one another, it is a story that reveals the nature of storytelling: “The laws of forgetting and of self-mutilation apply to any reader as well as to the author.”⁶⁰ All narratives are selective and like Nietzsche’s coin, the surfaced order of things establishes the real by rubbing it out: “Everything fades. If we talk for too long, I’ll forget how we started.”

EYE, THE AUTHOR

Ultimately, Leonard is the authority of truth in the film but he is also the center of doubt. The tattoo on his right arm reads: “Consider the source” and “memory is treachery.” Of course, creating his own memory system puts Leonard in the position

58. David Mamet, “Introduction” in Reginald Rose, *Twelve Angry Men*, Penguin Books, New York, 2006, p. 5.

59. Nietzsche, [1873] 1993, p. 81.

60. J. Hillis Miller, “Dismembering and Disremembering in Nietzsche’s ‘On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense’,” *Boundary 2*, vol. 9–10, 1981, p. 52.

of authoritative power. But he trusts his facts constructed on past truth, and what he authenticates using empirical knowledge creates a complex of proof: “The problem with employing such methods for the purposes of legitimation of knowledge, however, is, as Lyotard argues in regard to science, that it ‘leaves behind the metaphysical search for a first proof or transcendental authority as a response to the question: ‘how do you prove the proof?’ or, more generally, ‘Who decides the conditions of the truth?’”⁶¹

Leonard’s need to maintain a reliable story for himself poses the question of the authorship of narratives, or of the unreliable narrator and its authority. For the continuation and coherence of his own sense of self, Leonard needs to continue his lies. The quest here is not for justice but for its similar idea, justification, of what he comes to perceive to be a continuation of his truth.

OPEN LIES LIE OPEN: STORIES AND POSSIBILITIES

To conclude, every system holds the agent of its own demise, the assassin, “within our gate.”⁶² The strategy of *Memento* is to show that truth itself is the cloak of deception. Leonard’s system is made to fit him, but when he ultimately tricks himself, the self-deception is embedded using his own code-of-law or order. His path is a junction of his choices where everything looks backward and where the shape of the past holds and strangles the shape of the future.

Like the evolution of the detective genre, cultural phenomena take place against a political background and are sites of constant reinterpretation. In this cautionary tale, we shouldn’t take the past to be the truth: “Nietzsche gives an admirably succinct expression of this law of the torsion of truth upon itself in the notes written for a continuation of ‘On Truth and Lies’: ‘Truth kills—what is more, it kills itself (insofar as it recognizes that its foundation is error).’”⁶³ Like a trope, the signs of truth twist in on us and we are finally left to contemplate and re-tell its illusion, like the audience or the reader of this search at the tell-tale heart of the detective genre.

Lastly, an attempt should be made with hope that this revelation conceals a possibility. Poetically, the unstable and deceptive nature of truth might be saved by this necessity of constant remodeling. There may be no original proof, but there is

61. Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* [1984], quoted in Sibielski, 2004, p. 91.

62. Chesterton, [1901] 1946, p. 6.

63. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Le Livre du philosophe* [1969], Miller, 1981, p. 50.

an opening, a forking path like the famous garden of Borges.⁶⁴ In the words of artist Simone Leigh: “In order to tell the truth you need to invent what might be missing from the archive, to collapse time, to concern yourself with issues of scale, to formally move things around in a way that reveals something more true than fact.”⁶⁵

For modern viewers should not forget that what they see is but a small window of self-display, a frame, a screenplay, a grid. A truth is an art, meaning it is a representation. That is not to say it shouldn't be trusted. But it means to say, all solid truths are deceptive if they are not understood for what they are: concrete creation.

64. Jorge Luis Borges, *The Garden of Forking Paths* [1941], London, Penguin Modern, 2018.

65. Simone Leigh, *Sovereignty*, Official U.S. Presentation / 56th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2022. At The Institute of Contemporary Art – Boston, 2023, <https://simoneleighvenice2022.org/sovereignty/> (accessed 8 February 2023).

An Inquiry into Self-Deception: *Memento*, Truth-Display and the Detective Genre

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ABSTRACT:

This article proposes to analyze the concept of self-deception in Christopher Nolan's psycho-thriller film *Memento* (2000). Approached through the study of the senses and through a philosophical-semiological lense, the willing self-deception of the protagonist and misleading appearances central to the film's narrative structure provoke an inquiry into the mechanics of truth and visual displacement. The protagonist's memory-system sustains deceptiveness, which in turn allows one to conceptualize the structure of the story as a metanarrative of the detective genre.

RÉSUMÉ :

Cet article propose une analyse du concept de trahison dans le film *Memento* (2000) de Christopher Nolan. En étudiant les sens dans une approche sémantico-philosophique, l'aveuglement volontaire du protagoniste conceptualise une tromperie au tenant d'un paradigme sociojudiciaire qui comprend la perception du réel comme vérité acquise par le sens de la vue. Les apparences trompeuses interrogent le mécanisme d'un déplacement visuel et conceptualisent la structure de l'histoire comme métarécit du genre policier.

NOTE BIOGRAPHIQUE :

Étudiante à l'Université de Montréal, Juliette Leblanc poursuit présentement ses études à la maîtrise en littérature comparée. Elle s'intéresse au mouvement, au rythme et aux systèmes audibles dans la littérature et plus précisément à l'impact de la forme ouverte dans la poésie moderniste. Du visible au sensoriel, elle propose une étude intermédiaire de l'expérience littéraire.