

Epistemology, Truth, and Interpretation in Christopher Nolan's *Memento*

“Wittgensteinism”

Introduction

Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) is a highly complex work of cinematic art regarding both its narrative structure and its thematic scope. It is a curious detective story, in the tradition of the filmic genre of *noir* (or *neo-noir*), featuring a self-proclaimed detective, Leonard Shelby, who is a former insurance claims investigator, now seeking to find and kill the burglar who murdered his wife in an assault which left him with permanent brain damage. Due to the attack, Leonard has lost his ability to form long-term memories, which puts him in a state of continuous amnesia as to his immediate past, but he claims to remember everything that happened before the tragic incident.

However, Leonard turns out to be an unreliable narrator. As the filmic narrative progresses, it transpires that his memories prior to the incident may significantly have been modified as a result of "conditioning" and relying on a "system" whereby he acquires and organizes new knowledge. Moreover, the short-term memory loss severely limits Leonard's perception, thus the validity of his knowledge claims becomes doubtful. This sense of unreliability is further heightened by a shoddy character named Teddy, who gives us a radically different version of Leonard's post-incident life. In his account, Teddy systematically refutes every chunk of information that the viewers have managed to gather from Leonard's narration, so at the end of the day, they are left with two equally plausible versions of how the assault took place and what has happened to Leonard since he lost his short-term memory.

In my paper, I will argue from the premise that due to its "strict adherence to subjective narration, and the resultant privilege given to ambiguity over certainty" (Molloy 80), *Memento* indirectly addresses the perennial philosophical *topos* of the nature of truth. Leonard and Teddy, in turn, can be looked upon as representatives of two opposing philosophical positions, one of which claims allegiance to the existence of objective knowledge and its availability through rigorous investigation (Leonard), while the other represents a quasi-Nietzschean perspectivist view of truth and knowledge, which regards both notions as constructions, their validity being heavily dependent on interpretation (Teddy). These two positions appear to be mutually exclusive, because they regard each other as grounded in a fundamental mistake. Thus, the legitimacy of one position is founded on an efficient denial of the other, and vice versa, but for the same reason they also owe their very existence to each other. My main contention below is that the two conflicting epistemological

positions represented in *Memento* can be shown to be inextricably intertwined due mainly to the convoluted narrative structure in which the film's plot is represented.

My argument is divided into three sections. In the first one, I delineate the two philosophical positions represented by Leonard and Teddy, and their interrelatedness with the film's narrative technique. In the second, I focus on specific critical interpretations of *Memento* which revolve mostly around the existence or nonexistence of truth in the narrative. As I will demonstrate, these interpretive endeavors result either in a relativizing reading where "truth" *as such* is proclaimed nonexistent, or (less frequently) an affirmation of faith in objective knowledge and truth. I argue that such readings, however complex they may be otherwise, tend to oversimplify the complexity with which the question of truth is thematized by the film. In the third section, therefore, I propose an interpretive route, which, adopting Richard Rorty's term, I call "ironist." It is based on the assumption that instead of being preoccupied with proving or disproving the existence of truth, investigating the construction, legitimization, and interdependence of the various *truths* which get formulated in the filmic narrative can yield a more complex interpretive approach, which is better suited to the overall complexity of the film itself.

Viewed from this angle, the film allows for a thoroughly non-metaphysical definition of truth, which draws heavily on verbal and rhetorical strategies, thus introducing a concept of knowledge that does not seek to operate with the notion of objectivity or reality, but rather with those of persuasiveness and coherence. I contend that the film draws on an epistemological position in which truth is constructed by playing language games (in the Wittgensteinian sense), and thus it makes knowledge a matter of the way people describe and redescribe certain phenomena, rather than a matter of the extent to which people's observations correspond to the "reality" of those phenomena. Although the film presents two epistemological positions through Leonard and Teddy, it does not adhere rigidly to these positions, but rather problematizes them by showing how these positions cannot help but intertwine.

Facts and/or interpretations?

Narrative technique and epistemological (un)certainty

In this chapter, I wish to concentrate on the epistemological positions that are involved in constituting the philosophical dimension of *Memento*. A crucial aspect of this dimension is the fact that the viewers see the filmic narrative unfolding from the point of view of the self-entitled investigator Leonard Shelby, who has suffered brain damage that resulted in the loss of short-term memory. Due to the film's obscure narrative structure, the viewer has to adapt to Leonard's "10-minute memory": the main narrative, presented in color, is sliced into bits of approximately 5-8 minutes, shown in a *reverse* chronological order, separated from each other by scenes in black and white, which depict events chronologically progressing *forward*. In this way, the audience experiences the limitation of Leonard's perception caused by his limited short-term memory, which results in the experience of a radically subjectivized narrative on the viewer's part.

In an interview, Nolan relates that he intended to present *Memento's* narrative "subjectively," realizing that "if you tell it in reverse chronology then you deny the audience the information that the protagonist doesn't know, so in one sense, you are putting the audience in this guy's place" (Zak, "Guillermo del Toro and Christopher Nolan Talk 'Memento' & 'Remaining Strange'"). Thus, many of the events in the story, shown from Leonard's perspective, become permeated by a sense of epistemological uncertainty due to the breakdown of the causal link between the sequences following each other, so no "reliable" or "objective" information is available to Leonard and the viewer. As a consequence, the viewer is incapable of properly construing the significance of the events at the time of seeing them happen on the screen. Due to the fragmentation of the sequence of events, the different episodic fragments of the narrative in many cases can only be evaluated retrospectively, as the perception of the causal chain is reversed: the viewer first sees the effect and the preceding cause afterwards, which creates the paradoxical situation of regressing in narrative time, while progressing in the "real time" of the actual act of viewing.

This effect is most apparent in the scene which shows Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss) arriving home, with bruises on her face, claiming that a person called Dodd had beaten her. Leonard readily brings some ice to Natalie, and then proposes to go and deliver justice to Dodd for what he did to her. In the next scene, however, which happened antecedently in narrative time, we see that it was/is Leonard himself who punched/punches Natalie in the face, who deliberately provoked him to do so, thereby we gain new information not only

regarding the origin of Natalie's bruises, but also her character and her motivations. Herein lies the effect that the director strived to achieve: to limit the audience's knowledge of the events that Leonard experiences at the time of seeing them.

However, as Andrew Klein points it out, what really causes the whole narrative to be permeated by an inconvenient uncertainty is that we do not get any objective information on the actual past of Leonard; we do not get to know the "truth" of the narrative from an external, objective source. All that the audience is provided with are two contradictory versions of what might have happened to Leonard: one coming from Leonard himself, and the other from Teddy. Claire Molloy relates to this feature as "a narrational device that leaves the film open ended and asks the spectator to decide which account is true," adding that "absolute construction of the fabula is inhibited by the *syuzhet* and the *syuzhet*'s presentation of events make possible two (or more) fabulas" (83). This is due to the fact that *Memento*, as Molloy puts, "[refuses] to adhere to a clear delineation between objective and subjective narration" (83). Molloy argues that "the ambiguities in *Memento* are produced by the subversion of narrational norms as well as the establishment of particular intrinsic norms such as the *syuzhet* representation of external flashbacks in both plot-lines" (81). In this way, the supposedly objective flashbacks become subjective, which results in the formation of an ambiguous narrative due to the fact that the flashbacks provide most of the information that the viewer needs in order to reconstruct a coherent narrative of the film's past events. Nevertheless, and most importantly, despite the interpretive uncertainty of the narrative, both Leonard and Teddy claim to know "the *truth*" of what happened in Leonard's past. Meanwhile, Teddy continuously reflects on Leonard's way of living and system of investigation, which leads to a profound epistemological tension between them, stemming from the opposing philosophical positions that they often explicitly commit themselves to.

Leonard in many respects behaves like a *par excellence* positivist, who still cherishes the hope of there being an objective reality, a world "out there" that is entirely knowable through our senses, yet not dependent on them, in other words: a world not influenced by our subjectivity. Leonard very clearly expresses this view in a characteristically anti-idealist (quasi-empiricist) sentence: "The world doesn't disappear just because you close your eyes." He has worked out a "system" to gain, organize, and preserve knowledge: he writes notes, gets "facts" tattooed on his body, and takes photos, all of which function as prostheses, substituting his absent memory. Leonard seems to believe that this system allows him to capture a reality that is more pure and objective than what people with sound memory can perceive. What seems to be underlying Leonard's views on his relationship to the world is the

positivist epistemology for he clings on the notion that the notes and pictures one takes represent the world and its objects in an undistorted, unmediated manner. Leonard claims allegiance to this belief in a conversation with Teddy, saying:

Memory's not perfect. It's not even that good. Ask the police, eyewitness testimony is unreliable. The cops don't catch a killer by sitting around remembering stuff. They *collect facts, make notes*, draw conclusions. *Facts*, not *memories*: that's how you investigate. I know—it's what I used to do. Memory can change the shape of a room or the color of a car. It's an interpretation, not a record. Memories can be changed or distorted and they're irrelevant if you have the facts.

As we see, Leonard believes that memory stands in opposition to notes and pictures because memories fade and are influenced by our subjectivity, thus they cannot provide such an objective knowledge as “records” can, in the form of notes, pictures and tattoos. It is these records that Leonard refers to as “facts,” and claims that basing an investigation on such facts is the only correct way of executing forensic exegesis. Memories, being only interpretations of past experiences, are incapable of providing authentic and legitimate knowledge for a detective's work. This apparently un-Nietzschean insistence on the distinction between “facts” and “interpretations”¹ is reminiscent of Hume's distinction between “facts” and “values,” a differentiation between “the way the world *is*” and “the way it *ought to be*”² or the way we think or feel about it. Leonard claims to be able to gain knowledge about “the way the world is” via his system of investigation, which he believes to be an objective inquiry that enables him to obtain reliable information and knowledge about the world “out there.”

Leonard has a similarly positivistic understanding of the moral value of his acts, as he believes that “[his] actions still have meaning, even if [he] can't remember them.” This belief of his is rooted in his unconditional acceptance of the validity of the information that his system allows him to collect, so it does not really matter whether or not he himself remembers avenging his wife's murder, because his notes, pictures and tattoos are ample evidence of the “fact” that he has. Thus, vengeance becomes the main motivation and purpose of Leonard's actions, which now functions as an abstract concept justified in its own right by the “evidence” of Leonard's records. It is in this respect that Leonard's views on morality can be said to mirror traditional moral philosophies: the chief criterion for the legitimization of his

¹ As Nietzsche puts it: “Against that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying ‘there are only facts,’ I should say: no, it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations...” (Kaufmann 458).

² See David Hume: *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) Book III, I/I

actions is the abstract concept of vengeance, which here becomes a self-justifying end in itself, rather than a set of rules which are chosen primarily on the basis of their usefulness in a social context. Leonard organizes his whole life around the single goal of avenging his wife's death; his idealist moral concepts and his positivist system of knowledge-gathering all serve this purpose. Nonetheless, his blind belief in the absolute moral order that is established by his positivist understanding makes him vulnerable in the face of manipulation by those who know how his system works.

One of the characters who manipulate Leonard in the film is Teddy, who initially appears to be helping him, but turns out to have been abusing Leonard's condition ever since he lost his memory. Moreover, Teddy appears to be the typical Nietzschean perspectivist, who is trying to persuade Leonard throughout the narrative that his positivistic philosophy is not as ideal and legitimate as he thinks it is. In several instances, Teddy advises Leonard to reevaluate his system and his knowledge of himself. For instance, in their conversation that takes place in a diner, Teddy tells Leonard that he "can't trust a man's life to [his] little notes and pictures" because "[those] can be unreliable." This statement is a counterpoint to all of Leonard's beliefs, because it dismantles not only the objectivity and validity of his system of fact-gathering, but even absolute knowledge ("facts") *per se*, because saying that notes and pictures can be unreliable entails that they are as irrelevant to absolute certainties as any other sources of knowledge. Teddy's perspectivism is even more observable at the end of the movie, when he exposes Leonard's past in their final conversation (which of course is the first in the chronological order of the film). After Leonard kills Jimmy Grantz, a drug dealer, who falls victim to Teddy's manipulation of Leonard's "quest for revenge," Leonard comes to realize that he has killed the wrong person, he starts to see through Teddy's scheming, and calls him to task for it. Teddy's cynical response is that Leonard should enjoy his vengeance while he can, because a few minutes later he will not remember that it ever happened. When Leonard objects that Grantz was not his John G., Teddy retorts: "He was to you [...] What difference does it make whether he was your guy or not?", which is his way of justifying the fact that he shamelessly utilizes Leonard's belief in a firm epistemological and moral order. More importantly, this single exclamation exposes Teddy's perspectivism, because it claims allegiance to subjective "interpretations" against "facts," which forms a fundamental epistemological opposition to Leonard's belief in facts.

Another manipulative character in the film is Natalie, the femme fatale of the story, who also calls attention to the drawbacks of Leonard's epistemological position in many instances. The most significant point that she articulates is that Leonard "can question

everything” but he “cannot know anything for sure.” Leonard responds by saying that there *are* certainties, like the sense of touching something or knocking on a table, that is, empirical experience. Leonard’s positivism again interferes with perspectivist epistemological notions of Natalie.

It is notable that these two positions are represented in conversations, which dramatizes the clash between them. Moreover, a sense of epistemological indecisiveness seems to develop during the dialogues between the positivist Leonard and the perspectivist characters. For instance, while Leonard’s system is intended to seek for *the* truth, it becomes obvious by the end of the film that it is only a means of giving a purpose to his own life, so it has nothing to do with either objectivity or justice. On the other hand, Natalie manipulates Leonard into killing Teddy, so she acts out of revenge just as much as Leonard does, but by abusing Leonard’s condition, she does deliver justice to the right person, because it was indeed Teddy who manipulated Leonard into killing Jimmy Grantz, Natalie’s boyfriend. So Natalie gets her revenge, but it is different from Leonard’s Platonic concept of revenge, because the latter is most certainly unachievable and thus unending.

Nonetheless, Leonard also avenges his wife’s death in a way, because after killing Teddy, he takes a picture of his dead body, so there is at least a vague hope that he will not continue his vengeful quest. Teddy’s moral responsibility is more dubious than that of Natalie, given that he abused Leonard’s condition but at the same time he was the one who instigated Leonard’s investigation by always providing a John G., which after a while becomes an “empty category” in Leonard’s system, serving to keep the whole process running. Teddy has given important assistance to Leonard for his investigation, meanwhile abusing the mechanisms of Leonard’s system, which seems to give him no moral qualms. Leonard’s positivistic morality, by contrast, does not allow for deviations of this sort from his strict ethical code, which is driven by his belief in the validity of his putatively post-incident memories based on pieces of information recorded on Polaroid photos, on his skin, and on scraps of paper. Teddy, in contrast, appears to be the out-and-out perspectivist, who cannot accept the validity of any of Leonard’s chunks of information as instances objective truth, because, as he puts, “notes can be deceptive.” All through the narrative, Teddy denies the legitimacy of Leonard’s system, which comes to a dramatic climax at the end of the film, when—similarly to Natalie earlier in the narrative—he tells Leonard that it does not matter whether it is his John G. that he kills as long as he believes that it is his John G. Thus Teddy claims allegiance to subjective “interpretations” over “facts,” thereby creating the fundamental epistemological tension between him and Leonard. This tension stems from their

opposing views on objective truth, which is also a focal tension in the critical discourse on *Memento*. In those studies that deal with the film's philosophical relevance two fundamental epistemological positions are articulated, which in many ways correspond to the positions that are explicated in the film. In the following section, I examine some of these interpretations.

Ambiguities vs. certainties: the (de)construction of truth in *Memento*-criticism

Several scholarly interpretations of *Memento* reflect implicitly or explicitly on the epistemological dimensions of the film. Interestingly enough, the critical discourse that *Memento* generates seems to reenact, as it were, the epistemological tension represented in the film. Although most of the critics seem to operate under the assumption that it is possible to enclose the filmic text in a unified interpretation, differentiation must be made between those who claim that the film underscores the existence of some kind of an objective truth, and those who believe that it deconstructs such certainties by blurring the clear-cut distinction between truth and falsity or the reality and fiction.

Readings of the latter kind are the ones which construe the film in the light of postmodern theoretical insights. Besides their reliance on specific theories and theoreticians such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Frederic Jameson,³ such readings emphasize epistemological uncertainty, ambiguity, paradox, and the ultimate impossibility of coming to any definitive conclusion about whose truth claims are valid, those of Leonard, or those of Teddy. Furthermore, such studies often argue that what *Memento* dramatizes is the absence of absolute truths, which is exemplified by the very fact that the film can have no definitive interpretation.

A characteristic example of this interpretive tendency is Rosalind Sibielski's reading, which interprets Teddy's revelation of the "truth" as the ultimate dismantling of Leonard's positivistic notion of knowledge and investigation. Sibielski identifies Leonard's character with the prototypical empiricist/positivist of the Enlightenment-modernity project, arguing that the film systematically deconstructs the way of thinking that Leonard's character represents. Sibielski claims that Leonard's system reflects "Enlightenment modernity's unconditional faith in the infallibility of scientific investigation and empirical research." This

³ See Sibielski "Postmodern Narrative or Narrative of the Postmodern? History, Identity, and the Failure of Rationality as Ordering Principle in *Memento*," and Kravitz "The Culture of Disease and the Dis-ease of Culture: Re-membering the Body in *Fight Club* and *Memento*."

system by the end of the film fails spectacularly, as Lenny, refusing to believe Teddy's story, writes "Don't believe his lies" on the back of his photo of Teddy. Sibielski interprets this gesture as "Leonard's acknowledgement of his willingness to lie to himself 'to be happy' [which] belies any claim in the film that his inquiry into his wife's murder is centered upon discovering the 'truth' of the events surrounding her death." However, the problem is more complicated than that, because Leonard, instead of giving himself the chance to simply *forget* what Teddy has just told him, he consciously decides to *remember it as a lie*, whereby he implicitly acknowledges the truth (or at least the plausibility) of Lenny's story. Sibielski, however, shies away from making this inference and chooses to blur the difference between Leonard's and Teddy's "truth." She relativizes their positions and concludes that although Leonard's account of his past is not reliable, it does not mean that Teddy's version is any less unreliable, so ultimately "it is impossible for either Leonard within the film's narrative or the film's spectators examining it, to ever achieve a definitive accounting of Leonard's past." The film itself, however, offers a more complex problematic than that of relativization, because a chiasmic reversal takes place and, ironically enough, the cynical and relativistic Teddy becomes the conveyor of *a* truth, because, for all we know, his narrative sounds more coherent and convincing than Leonard's elaborate, but highly contradictory account of his own quest for *the* truth.

Another critic, Melissa Clarke, claims that in *Memento* "reality and truth are the very complex results of shifting, multiply variant possible connections between the present and the sheets of past" (180). In her Bergsonian account of the film, Clarke exposes her view that "*Memento* is characterized by a chronic undecidability between what is true and false" so that "in each scene we are presented with a simultaneity of possible interpretations" (175). She claims that this undecidability originates in the film's demonstration of Bergson's concept of a multilayered past, which results in the formation of multiple possible presents simultaneously, blurring the distinction between reality and fiction as well as between truth and falsity. When it comes to the actual rhetorical moves she makes, it is observable that she remains loyal to this understanding of the movie, as she does not take Teddy's "truth" for granted, but rather strives to show how Leonard's past is unknowable in the narrative.

Bennett Kravitz argues along similar lines when he contends that Leonard's past lacks a "master narrative, which is a paradoxically convenient state of affairs for Leonard" (36), who can thus shape his own past via his "system" of investigation. According to this reading, the "unreliability of plot allows the audience to experience Leonard's detached reality," which, in Kravitz's view, results in the creation of multiple, equally competent plot lines (38).

Thus, the conclusion—as in Sibielski and Clarke—again is that Leonard’s positivistic notions of truth are illusory and Teddy is no more reliable than any of the characters in the movie, which, again, renders *Memento* incapable of being given a definitive interpretation.

What seems to be a common element in the interpretations I have cited is that they are all hinged upon the notion of “truth” in terms of absence, unattainability, or impossibility. Another notion that they seem to share is that the limitation of the characters’ knowledge is mirrored, as it were, by the viewer’s limited understanding or the critics’ inability to give a definitive interpretation of the film. Thus, the assumption is that the truth thematized in the filmic narrative as related to Leonard’s obscure past can be equated with the validity any critic or reader can claim for his/her interpretation. My contention is, however, that such interpretations cannot avoid the trap they wish to avoid the most, that is, constructing their own grand metanarratives of the film. Sibielski, for instance, does rely on Lyotard’s famous notion of “grand narratives,” pointing out that Leonard’s apparently exhaustive collection of notes is supposed to function as the grand narrative of his investigation, and thereby also that of his life as such (Sibielski). In Lyotard’s view, the problem with grand narratives is that while they aspire to alleged “objectivity” so that they can legitimize knowledge claims, they themselves cannot be legitimized against any other narrative or source of knowledge, for they are supposed to constitute “authentic” knowledge.⁴ These narratives of legitimation, however, are no less in need of legitimation than what they serve to legitimize. Thus, the question arises: what legitimizes the seemingly subversive but none the less totalizing claims about the absence of truth or the impossibility of interpretation?

It is a very similar question that Carlos Gallego raises in his study, in which he questions the legitimacy of the postmodern assertion that there is no possibility for historicity. Gallego attacks Baudrillard’s assertion that 9/11 is only an “image-event,” which according to Gallego is “a rhetorical method of insisting on the condition of simulacra despite the impact of 9/11” (53). Gallego claims that “the postmodern claim for an ‘end of history’” is in fact “more of a rallying cry for collective denial than a critically substantiated position concerning the possibility for historical change” (35). Gallego uses *Memento* as a postmodern cultural product that allegorizes this conscious denial of history. He claims that Leonard is the representative of an “exhausted modernity”⁵ in denial of both its failure and incompleteness,”

⁴ See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (6-9).

⁵ Gallego claims that modernity is exhausted because of the “systematic and anti-utopic quality of the wars—from the barbarity of trench warfare to the mass killing of nuclear weaponry” which “undermined modernity’s idealist objectives, giving rise to the antisystemic skepticism that would eventually come to be known as postmodern” (43).

which modernity, as well as Leonard, tries to overcome by forming an “ideological fantasy,” namely postmodernity, which is dramatized in the film by Leonard’s creation of Sammy’s story (46). Using this analogy, Gallego asserts in the final section of his paper that Baudrillard, by degrading 9/11 to an “image-event,” formulates a “necessarily exclusionary and one-dimensional standpoint, reminiscent of Leonard’s denial in *Memento*” (53).

Apparently, Gallego approaches *Memento* as being demonstrative of a historical period in which the legitimacy of historicity is no longer acknowledged. Gallego, however, argues that “postmodernity should be studied within an older and more general reality-consciousness dialectic” which “permits a clearer understanding of its function as a nonrevolutionary phenomenon” (56), rather than viewing postmodernity from a postmodern point of view, which Baudrillard did when he had written about 9/11. Gallego approaches *Memento* in a similar manner, as he analyzes it using Benjamin’s concept of the “dialectical image,” which is an interpretive model that is *designed* to “foreground the symptomatic, historiographic, and representational features” of cultural products (61), i.e., create historically relevant meaning in every commodity, cultural product or event. This approach is based on a historical materialism, i.e., the assumption that history is encoded in commodities, so that history exists essentially in every cultural product (Gallego 37). It is not unexpected, then, that Gallego is able to maintain that 9/11 is a historically relevant *event*, because, utilizing Benjamin’s dialectics to analyze 9/11, ironically enough, as a “dialectical image-event” (51), he is able to extract historical relevance from the event of the terrorist attacks by placing it within a coherent narrative that is woven of historically relevant information, thereby proving that it *is* an event.

What Lyotard, along with most representatives of postmodern thought, would criticize concerning this position is the legitimacy of history as a self-proclaimed totalizing narrative, given that it poses as objective, while in fact it has never been the case (hence Baudrillard’s assumption of the “end of history”). Gallego, claiming that this assumption “is more like a rallying cry for collective denial,” points out that postmodern thought, while trying to delegitimize history on the basis of its self-proclaimed validity, is none the less institutionalized and thus it is as much in need of validation as any other theory.

It is not surprising perhaps that Gallego’s analysis of *Memento* does not exhibit the kind of skepticism the previously introduced readings do; believing in the legitimacy of history *per se* (i.e., theory), he accepts Teddy’s account because it seems to be the truth of Leonard’s past. In this way, Gallego articulates an epistemological position concerning *Memento*’s plot that is diametrically opposed to those who analyze the film with a postmodern

rhetoric. Among Gallego's lines there lurks the assumption that objectivity does exist, so that reality, history and theory are all still accessible to us through systematic and attentive inquiry, "within an older and more general reality-consciousness dialectic" (Gallego 56).

G. Christopher Williams more explicitly articulates a similar position as he claims that *Memento* "has not succeeded in destroying a concept of 'factuality' because [its] 'facts' are merely a representation based on Leonard's sense of what his notes mean." Williams claims that the film illustrates "an underlying nihilism in postmodern thought through a series of ideas heavily associated with current postmodern thinking, including historical revisionism, the potential for producing new histories through such revision, and the creation of self and identity in a postmodern environment." Throughout his interpretation of *Memento*, Williams relies on the work of such authors as Baudrillard, Linda Hutcheon and Frank Kermode, demonstrating that the film "would seem to underscore the idea that historical 'truth' is not objectively conveyed." Williams's conclusion is that however hard it tries, *Memento* ultimately fails to deconstruct the concept of objective knowledge. He asserts that the film's "choice to make 'fact' somehow mean the same thing as representation through the inscription of 'facts' on flesh" is logically flawed, because a tattoo "is still merely a sign," i.e., "they are representations of truth." Williams criticizes Baudrillard for a similarly "incorrect equation of factuality and representation," of which the film is also illustrative of. However, Williams contends that the film leaves hope for the existence of "another kind of inscription" which is "less empirical and more innate perhaps than St. Paul's inscription of the Law on the heart [...] despite Leonard's confusion."

The last few paragraphs in Williams's account are illustrative of an ossified hope for the existence of truth as "absolute fact," along with an objective reality and a universal moral order. Nonetheless, Williams claims at the end that "Leonard's problem is the same problem shared by all detectives and historians," who "simply cannot see the big picture, and so he is left to do as anyone handicapped by a lack of omniscience must do." Williams seems to suggest that Leonard after all is not much different from all of us, only that he does not know enough to see the "big picture" of the world that he lives in. In my opinion, however, the film does not quite invite the interpretation that Leonard would simply need a "big picture" in order to function correctly in his life, because, as Williams also implies, we are all lacking in omniscience, so the "big picture" simply does not exist, only in a kind of a positivistic worldview that Leonard—and apparently Williams—seems to advocate.

It can be concluded that those who claim that the film rejects the possibility of objective knowledge articulates their arguments in a very similar manner to those who support

the validity of absolute knowledge regarding the narrative. Thus, even the postmodernist accounts cannot help but claim not-knowing and the absence of truth as the final truth of *Memento*. By relying on an established canon of postmodern theoretical texts, they unconsciously mimic the mechanisms of validating truth-claims relying on metanarratives. By restricting their discursive practices to this, otherwise traditional, way of argumentation, they inevitably articulate a position that does not at all distance their argument from the kind of truth that they strive to dismantle. In other words, they create the semblance of an objective truth regarding the film's narrative precisely by striving to prove that the film leaves no place for such inferences. Thus, although there is an obvious tension between the two groups introduced above, they seem to be unable to give up their search for objective knowledge. In what follows, I will discuss the operations of a thoroughly non-metaphysical "truth" in the film, making an attempt to offer an alternative way of interpretation.

Truth vs. truths: an ironist interpretation of *Memento*

I would like to start expounding my approach by introducing a reading of the film which illustrates how the film dismantles the logocentric understanding of truth and memory, thereby introducing a curative understanding of memory, in which it serves as a means to *create* knowledge through its inscriptive mechanisms. Robert Avery claims that "*Memento* puts the stability and integrity of its own rhetoric of memory – memory as total recall – into a gyre of self-reflexive uncertainty by positing a violent surrogation of forensic exegesis, or the inscriptive process, for living memory" (60). Avery contends that the film is "maintaining a positive valence of living, self-present memory and conceptualizing forgetfulness as memory's perfunctory antithesis by showing the futility of Leonard's avenging acts" (58). But, as Avery claims, the film in a Derridean manner ultimately "shows forensic exegesis *to be* memory" thereby contradicting its own seemingly preferred standpoint, which advocates the Platonic concept of memory (63). So, according to this view, *Memento* dismantles the Platonic, logocentric concept of knowledge, because it introduces an understanding of memory which is epistemically productive, so it depicts how truth is *created* through the inscriptive mechanisms of memory, which Avery, after Derrida, calls "violent surrogation." He concludes, that the "film resists [...] logocentric notions of memory, truth, knowledge, and reality" (78), and thus it dramatizes a crisis in epistemology (Avery 79).

It is my contention that the kind of self-reflexivity that Avery points out extend to the film's epistemological dimensions, so that it does not only present a crisis in epistemology by

deconstructing logocentric notions of truth, but describes truth as a result of linguistic formulation. As I claimed in the first chapter, the positivist and perspectivist understandings of truth are often intertwined in the film, and in this way, I argue, a rather flexible concept of truth emerges, which relies on *language* as its main vehicle throughout the film, rather than merely on “violence” as Avery claims.⁶ It is observable in the film how Leonard’s whole system is based on the concept of “redescriptions,” whereby the film subverts Leonard’s positivistic epistemological notions. Moreover, Teddy, always criticizing Leonard’s positivism, is the character who dismantles objective knowledge in the film to replace it with a non-metaphysical epistemological concept. Teddy, being a Nietzschean perspectivist, does not settle for the metaphysical understanding of truth as crystallization of knowledge.

Interestingly enough, a subtle tension is observable between Teddy’s claims that advocate a perspectivist epistemology, and his claim to expose *the* truth of Leonard’s past. At this point, let us compare the narrative that Teddy exposes as what truly happened after Leonard’s injury and Leonard’s account of it. Clearly, Leonard has a limited perspective on what has happened since the incident, provided that all he has as “memory” consists of a few notes and tattoos. Very few of the tattoos are related to Leonard’s investigation, and these are supplemented only by an incomplete police file that he is unable to entirely read through even once due to his lack of a sound short-term memory. However, using his tattoos, his police file and a few notes as clues, Leonard has created an account of his post-incident life that, due to his limited scope, is not very detailed or coherent.

Teddy’s account, on the other hand, is a more compelling one for the viewer, and even for Leonard, because it seems to account for events and people that Leonard’s narrative cannot. In Leonard’s account, John G. is the main cause of the mystery that is not yet solved; in Teddy’s narrative, there is no question as to the identity of John G., since there is no obscurity regarding how Leonard’s wife died, and even Sammy Jankis’s story is involved in this coherent narrative. Thus, Teddy’s story is compelling because it unifies all the observations that we were presented with so far by Leonard in the film, whereas Leonard’s version fails to account for many of these details in such a coherent fashion. It is observable in Teddy’s rhetoric that he dismantles Leonard’s story not by refuting it through counterarguments, but by giving a new meaning to the bits and pieces of information that constitute Leonard’s account, thereby reinterpreting his clues. As a result, Teddy addresses

⁶ Avery uses „violence” both in its literal meaning (violating the body, which is a cure for the loss of masculinity for Leonard), and in its metaphorical meaning that was proposed by Derrida (violation of memory by writing, which creates false knowledge as opposed to self-present, living memory that stores genuine knowledge).

the events that we have come to know about from Leonard in a very different manner, so that ultimately he weaves a coherent narrative by redescribing events in a causally consistent manner.

This notion mirrors Richard Rorty's conception of Hegel's dialectic, which he defines "as the attempt to play off vocabularies against one another, rather than merely to infer propositions from one another," thus dialectic can be regarded as "the partial substitution of redescription for inference" (*Contingency* 78). In Rorty's view, Hegel's argumentation relies on redescribing certain philosophical concepts or questions and thereby arriving at philosophically relevant conclusions, rather than by offering mere logical propositions (78). Redescription, in this regard, means giving a new meaning to a certain phenomenon or concept by using different words to relate to it. This is apparently the case with Teddy's narrative, and his redescription of the clues that Leonard has of his past, namely his incomplete police file, and his obscure memory of his wife, Sammy Jankis, and the incident. Teddy redescribed these clues in such a way that they will point towards Leonard as the ultimate cause of much of his struggle, for instance that he killed his own wife, or that he deceived himself by his notes and tattoos to conceal the truth. So by the time Teddy finishes exposing his version of Leonard's past, Leonard does not have any ground from which to argue, because all his arguments are refuted by Teddy's claims. In this way, Teddy's narrative is more compelling due to the *vocabulary* that it uses to describe Leonard's past. This vocabulary, or in Wittgensteinian terms "language-game," grants an overall coherence to the events that it describes as opposed to Leonard's vocabulary which, due to Leonard's limited understanding of the world around him (in Rorty's terms, his limited final vocabulary),⁷ does not cohere the way Teddy's does.

Ludwig Wittgenstein defined the concept of language-games in his *Philosophical Investigations* as a set of words which one uses to describe certain phenomena. Wittgenstein illustrates this notion through, for instance, his thought experiment in which a builder and his assistant use certain building stones, namely blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams. There is a need for interaction between the builder and the assistant, for the builder needs the building stones in a certain order, therefore they have to use a primitive language which consists of the words

⁷ Rorty defines final vocabularies as „a set of words which [people] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. [...] They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively, sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. [...] It is 'final' in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language" (*Contingency* 73). Some of the most frequently used terms in Leonard's final vocabulary are "vengeance," "condition," "incident," "short-term memory loss," "fact," "investigation." He simply interprets everything in terms of these and similar words, not being able to learn any new words to refer to the events that happen to him. This is one of the main causes of his vulnerability to others' manipulation.

“block,” “pillar,” “slab,” and “beam.” “[The builder] calls them out,” and “[the assistant] brings the stone he learnt to bring at such-and-such a call” (Wittgenstein 3).

It is observable in this thought experiment that the meaning of the words is not as significant as the use of the words themselves: it does not make much difference in this language whether a beam is called an “apple,” or a block is called a “lamp,” as far as both of the people who use this language have an agreement over the words they use to name different objects. In a similar way, as Wittgenstein claims, we use certain language-games in every aspect of our lives, so that ultimately he calls “the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the ‘language-game’” (5). In the case of *Memento*, there are several language-games that are simultaneously used in connection with one concept or event, of which just one example is Leonard’s past, which appears to be described by two different language-games, one that is used by Teddy and the other by Leonard. The difference between these vocabularies is caused by the implementation of redescrptions in the language games that they previously used to talk about those events. Although Teddy’s language games are more flexible than those of Leonard (due to the latter’s inability to extend his final vocabulary), Leonard himself is still able to perform a redescription, which nonetheless has a crucial significance in the narrative of *Memento*.

Let us consider the scene in which Leonard infers that Teddy is John G. (this is the scene which directly leads up Teddy’s murder), for it is fruitful in demonstrating the idea and importance of redescrptions in language-games. In this scene, Leonard opens the envelope that Natalie gave him previously, which contains John Edward Gammell’s DMV information. Leonard, seeing Teddy’s face on the driver license, looks at the picture that he has of Teddy, and starts to suspect that Teddy is not who he claims himself to be. Then, looking at the tattoos on his body, Leonard finds the license plate number tattooed on his thigh as “FACT 6,” then again, looking at the DMV info, seeing that the two license plate numbers are identical, Leonard concludes that Teddy is his John G. The most important consequence of this finding is that he writes “HE IS THE ONE” on the back of Teddy’s picture, thereby radically modifying the language game that he uses in connection with Teddy. In this way, Teddy (or rather the *concept* of Teddy in Leonard’s mind) goes through a process of redescription, thus this scene dramatizes how our view of others is determined by the language game that we use to relate to them. A less significant modification is implemented right after this move, as Leonard, seeing the tattoo on his chest that reads “JOHN G. RAPED AND MURDERED MY WIFE,” adds another inscription to the note on the back of Teddy’s picture, reading, “KILL HIM.” This wording does little to contribute to the culmination of

these events, because the note “HE IS THE ONE” alone would be enough for Leonard to kill Teddy; however, “KILL HIM” entails a purpose, a teleological endpoint as opposed to the previously inscribed “HE IS THE ONE,” as this is also a redescription of Teddy’s picture, and thus of Teddy as a mental concept. In this way, the person that Leonard knows as Teddy, becomes a murderer in one single scene, “who raped and killed” the protagonist’s wife, which is the result of a sequence of redescriptions implemented by Leonard himself.

Leonard’s radical change in relating to Teddy resonates with Rorty’s assertion that “alternative vocabularies” or language-games are “more like alternative tools” (11), some of which happen to work better in achieving different purposes (e.g. relating to the world and its phenomena). Leonard’s initial redescription in his language game related to Teddy (resulting in the inscription of “DON’T BELIEVE HIS LIES”) can thus be regarded as his implementation of a new tool in order to achieve the goal of preventing himself to believe Teddy. By recording Teddy’s license plate number as “FACT 6”, Leonard guarantees that he will kill Teddy, and so his subsequent identification of him as John G. in the scene that directly leads up to his murder is already planned, but then forgotten at the time of Leonard’s inference that Teddy is John G.

At this point, however, it becomes observable how a non-metaphysical concept of truth is operating in Leonard’s system. It is non-metaphysical in the sense that Rorty described the ironists’ relation to truth and knowledge: “[t]hey do not take the point of discursive thought to be knowing, in any sense that can be explicated by notions like ‘reality,’ ‘real essence,’ objective point of view,’ and ‘the correspondence of language of reality’” (*Contingency* 75). In other words, this kind of truth has nothing to do with a metaphysical realm in which Truth exists and those with potential abilities are able to extract this quasi-divine knowledge from that source beyond the physical world (which is by and large the Platonic, metaphysical concept of truth). It is more of a truth that is constructed by the use of different *words* for different *purposes* in the hope that these words will be efficient in fulfilling those goals.

Apparently, this premise dominates Natalie’s and Teddy’s acts in *Memento*, as this is precisely the two manipulators of Leonard do, though mostly unconsciously, in order to keep Leonard under their control. But ironically enough, and despite his insistence that he seeks genuine knowledge with his system, Leonard’s operations also function with this non-positivist, non-metaphysical notion of truth, which is observable all through the film: from the point of its inception, Leonard’s system is almost completely detached from reality, only interfering with it when an input is provided from a second party (e.g. Teddy or Natalie), and

when Leonard identifies someone as his “John G.,” and kills him/her subsequently. This feature of his system makes it dependent on other people’s information, so that it is ultimately not suitable for differentiating between “truth” and “falsity” in the metaphysical sense. Nonetheless, some kind of a “truth” still has to operate in that system, for otherwise there would be nothing that would persuade Leonard to kill people. Thus, rhetoric and the use of language games have a crucial significance in Leonard’s system, as it is much more sensitive to an ironist truth and processes of redescription than metaphysical propositions about truthfulness or falsity. Moreover, in this regard the truth value of Teddy’s narrative is completely beside the point, because saying that it is true or concluding that it’s truth-value is up for grabs does not change the fact that the film, through its introduction of language games as organizing principles of Leonard’s system, and its presentation of redescription as a moment of truth-*creation*, dramatizes an ironist epistemology and its workings.

Conclusion

The readings in *Memento*’s critical discourse, which I introduced in the second part of this paper, all seem to search for *the* truth of the narrative despite the film’s more complex problematization of truth and objectivity. I have argued that the film treats such claims the way “ironists” approach logical propositions: “logical arguments [...] are very well in their way, and useful as expository devices, but in the end not much more than ways of getting people to change their practices without admitting they have done so” (Rorty 78). It is not the film’s intention to provide mere logical propositions for us, but to show that these statements do not come from outside social and cultural practices; rather they are constructed within society through social interaction by means of descriptive strategies. The film can be interpreted as occupying a metaposition in relation to epistemology as much as Rorty’s concepts do so in respect to philosophy, and it does so in order to try and provide people with new experiences, which requires new ways of describing and explaining phenomena. Visual representation for this purpose is even more suitable than verbal, for it requires entirely genuine language games to verbally account for the experience that it seeks to share with us. This I perhaps failed to live up to; I used an already existing language game to describe the plethora of concepts that *Memento* introduces, although I have done so to show how the film problematizes those language games that have dominated Western discourses of truth and knowledge. Hopefully, this I have achieved, for the language game that I have used in my

analysis of the film is more suitable for meta-philosophical inquiry than those that I introduce in the second part of this paper or those which the film presents through the dialogues between Leonard, Teddy and Natalie. Admittedly, the film's presentation of certain linguistic and visual phenomena has enabled me to conceptualize its philosophical themes in terms of epistemological language games, which made it possible for a meta-epistemological approach to be fruitful, that is, it made it possible for me to describe the film through a Rortyan language game.

The film's refusal to rigidly adhere to the philosophical positions that are entertained by it is certainly a feature that several interpretations describe by using words like "uncertainty," ambiguity," indecisiveness;" let alone those, perhaps more traditional accounts, that do not even acknowledge the existence of such a feature in the film. However, it is certain that the "truth" is to be agreed upon via language, and thus it becomes inevitable to think in such terms: to articulate one's logical propositions bearing in mind that "they are not much more than ways of getting people to change their practices without admitting they have done so" (Rorty 78).

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