

Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University

Department of England- and America-Studies  
Frankfurt am Main

Title:

**“Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* – Analysis of  
the narrative structure of a  
*noirish revenge film* “**

Torben Schmidt  
Grüner Weg 14  
65611 Brechen  
mail@torbenschmidt.de

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Dr. Robert Hurd

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## **0. Introduction**

Christopher Nolan's low budget film *Memento* (2000), which is based on the concept of a short story named *Memento Mori* written by Nolan's brother Jonathan, was certainly one of the most successful films in the United States in 2000. In most cinemas it was shown for more than 15 weeks in the summer season – the most competitive season of the year. While the success of many modern Hollywood films is a result of “money, hype and more money”, *Memento* “represents a triumph of writing, directing, and performance” (Klein 2001). This film belongs to the so called *neo-noir* and *revenge-film* genre. In this paper these two genres will first of all be described in detail. Afterwards, the plot and the narrative structure of *Memento* – which is extremely complex, clever and demands intelligence and constant attention from its spectators – will be discussed.

## **1. Classic *Film Noir*: Definition, primary characteristics, conventions and historical surroundings**

### **1.1 Definition**

In the early 40s a new form of cinema emerged in America. Dark and gloom laden, it reflected the anxieties of a country entering a new era. Cynical and subversive in attitude, here was the antithesis of Hollywood's glamour productions of the 30s (Cameron 1993; Copjec 1993). The term *film noir* (literally black film) was first introduced by the French critic Nino Frank in 1946 as he noticed “how dark and often black” (Tims 1996) the settings and themes of these Hollywood films were. John Huston's detective story “The Maltese Falcon” (1941), starring Humphrey Bogart, can be considered the first film of this genre. Welles' “Touch of Evil” (1958), starring Charlton Heston, marks the end of the classic *film noir* cycle (Crime Culture “Neo-Noir” 2002). Unlike other forms of cinema, *film noir* has no elements that it can truly call its own. Rather, *film noir* borrows elements from other forms, usually from the crime and detective genres, but often overlapping into thrillers, horror, and even

science fiction (Copjec 1993). Certain melodramas, cowboy films, and even musicals also fit in this particular genre (Encarta 2002). The primary moods of classic *film noir* are “melancholy, alienation, bleakness, disillusionment, disenchantment, pessimism, ambiguity, moral corruption, evil, guilt and paranoia” (Tims 1996). As far as the typical characters in these films are concerned, it has to be pointed out that there traditionally is a classical male protagonist. The main characteristics of the typical *film noir* protagonist will now be described in detail.

## **1.2 The role of the male protagonist**

This person – in many cases impersonated like mentioned before by the job of a “hard-boiled” (Crime Culture “*Film Noir*” 1999) private detective<sup>1</sup> – is alienated from society and creates a feeling of social estrangement and disillusion. He is usually a hard-working, “brooding, menacing, sinister, sardonic, disillusioned, frightened and insecure” (Tims 1996) loner hidden in metropolitan architecture who makes his daily way through desolate redlight districts and other filthy and ghetto-like areas of his environment looking for possible hints for his work. Furthermore, the protagonist never succeeds in becoming economically and privately successful. He neither becomes rich, nor does he find a loving woman. Encarta (2002) considers this phenomenon the “opposite of the American Dream.” The dark and scary setting of *film noir* is the everyday-world of the protagonist. There is no room for peace or real happiness in his life. Through his eyes the recipient is shown a world dominated by corruption and greed, violence and crime in which the protagonist sometimes seems to have difficulties with drawing a clear line between right and wrong. As a result of this, he sometimes finds himself closer to the scenery of crime than one would expect a person in his position to be, e.g. illustrated by a friendship to some “syndicate’s big shot underling” (Blaser 1999) or his fatal affection for a woman from the underworld, which usually

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<sup>1</sup> particularly as exemplified by Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* and as Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* (Crime Culture “*Film Noir*” 1999).

leads to his own downfall. A description of this type of woman – the so called *femme fatale* – will follow now.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.3 The *femme fatale*

Besides the male protagonists, the *femme fatale* resembles the other key iconic figure of *film noir*.

She poses seductively both on film posters and on hundreds of mid-twentieth century pulp covers. The elements of the image are a kind of visual shorthand for perilous attraction and steamy corruption. Sometimes the dangerous woman is simply a sexual predator who tempts and weakens a male protagonist; sometimes she actually imitates male aggression and appropriates male power. On the poster or pulp cover she perhaps holds only a cocktail glass and a smouldering cigarette, or she might hold a gun and might by the end of the narrative have pulled the trigger. Constrained by the Hays Code, Hollywood tended to package the *femme fatale* narrative in ways that ensured the defeat of the independent female, but such was the power of the image of the sexual, aggressive, strong woman that she in many ways, in the minds of audiences, resisted this formulaic reassertion of male control (Crime Culture “*Film Noir*” 1999).

So the role of the “mysterious, (...) gorgeous, unloving, predatory, (...) unreliable, irresponsible, manipulative and desperate” (Tims 1996) *femme fatale* in *film noir* is extraordinarily dominant and seems to be painted far away from reality. The greatest difference between the ‘real’ and the ‘noir’ woman is the ambition the on-screen version has (Blaser 1999). Housewives rarely represent a threat to the men and the patriarchal system. In contrast, the *femme fatale*’s industriousness for independence and her sexual powers and ambitions jeopardize not only the protagonist, but also the entire system behind him in a tenacious way. Blaser (1999) says that “the *femme fatale* represents the most direct attack on traditional womanhood and the nuclear family.” In addition to the role of the male protagonist and the *femme fatale* there are of course some more characteristics of classic film noir which will now be discussed.

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<sup>2</sup> For a description of the role of the *femme fatale* in film noir see Blaser 1999.

#### 1.4 Further characteristics of classic *film noir* – Story line, mood, tone, visual and cinematic elements

One of the most important characteristics of classic film noir is the story line, because all these films had two similarities:

They were all dark, desperate tales and they were all based in contemporary settings of the city, or the urban sprawl. Their stories often centred on law and order, with outsiders, opportunists, losers and criminals busy plotting revenge or murder. (...) The mood always remains the same. Classic *film noir* stories, no matter their detail, are always pessimistic, obsessive and full of dark intent. Part of this pessimism is to do with an inescapable fate that reaps its ill harvest come what may (*What makes a classic film noir movie? With reference to the Maltese Falcon, The Big Sleep and Sunset Boulevard* (2000)).

Schrader (1972) also sees some common characteristics of classic *film noir*. He puts emphasis on film noir as a visual style. He says this genre was characterised by “mood” and “tone”:

Watching film noirs, I have noticed some elements which they all have in common. One of the techniques used is the very low key lighting which obscures the action. The uses of night and shadows are a recurring factor in noir films, emphasising coldness and darkness. In the films, the world often seems like a prison, this is often shown through image metaphors like sun blinds. A lot of use of extreme low and high angle perspectives which serve to create a mood of uneasiness and loneliness in noirs (Schrader 1972).

So in the classic *film noir* the audience is introduced to the dark world of crime, a world full of shadows, rain drenched streets and sleazy bars. The photography is equally distinctive. With disorientating camera angles, expressionist, distorted close-ups and chiaroscuro lighting that fills the frame with shafts of light and shadow, a claustrophobic world of fear and paranoia is created (Crime Culture “*Film Noir*” 1999). These, and many other filmic elements and devices, constitute meaning in the early films. The focus will now be put on the relations between the classic *film noir* and the social and cultural surroundings in the United States at this particular time.

## 1.5 Historical and social surroundings

“Cinematic noir can be seen as closely related to the modernist crisis of culture – as reflecting the feelings of nightmarish alienation, disorientation and disintegration that are often taken as hallmarks of the modernist sensibility.” This is the first sentence of a definition of the term given on the website of Crime Culture “Film Noir” (1999). But does the *film noir* genre really reflect the American society of the late 30s, 40s and 50s?<sup>3</sup> Classical ‘*noirish*’ films emerged during and after World War II, greatly influenced by the circumstances at that time. In order to understand the development of *film noir* one has to go even further back and observe the situation in America from the 1930s up to the late fifties. In the thirties the whole country was struggling with depression and the problems (widespread unemployment etc.) contributed to this being a difficult time for the American people. When America entered the battlefields of the Second World War it changed the country and its situation. While most parts of the world were shattered at the end of the war, the USA had managed to leap out of the depression, build a high employment rate and become the undisputed leader of the world without even suffering any sort of destruction in America. In a way World War II was the best that could have happened to the United States. They now played the most decisive role in the world, once again underlining their ambition to be a strong and almost invincible nation. In the late forties and fifties the American economy was in full bloom. It seemed like the citizens wanted to make up for all they had missed out during the depression. Along with the economic boom came the well-known baby boom and also a high increase in marriages. Families moved out to live in the suburban communities which, in fact, exploded. By all appearances, people had the need to build new larger houses. Hence there was a population increase in metropolitan areas while the number of people living in agrarian areas decreased heavily. Since the surroundings in the suburban lives were (and still are) very similar, people longed for some rapport, which most people found in religious participation. Religion drew large crowds especially

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<sup>3</sup> The following explanations are mainly based on Hordnes’ (2002) article.

because of Cold War issues which put the communists in the position of a new enemy, matter-of-fact, most people simply saw communists as “Anti-God”. Thereby religion also became a form of expression for strong patriotism. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, among others, encouraged the American citizens in their new-found pride and the government liked to make people think that the good times were there to stay (Hordnes 2002). Post-war life also had consequences on the lives and roles of family and its members. The hard-working (male) individual who had always advanced by means of his own creativity and ability had now become a person within a collective cooperation. The women, on the other hand, were led back to their pre-war working routine: the household. It was seen as a matter of obligation that they would leave their jobs so the veterans could get them back. Most people were content with their lives at that time, but there was a minority of citizens questioning the new situation of wealth. They became more and more uneasy while seeing the American society become more conformist and more materialistic. That was the point at which two entirely different approaches to life clashed: Idealism and materialism.

It was also due to the fact that the states were globally involved in various matters and all these responsibilities were reason enough to scare at least some of the American people. Another feeling that came up in post World War II America was a certain “paranoia” (Hordnes 2002). The Americans felt their new interests threatened by the communists. Of course, this way of thinking, the breakout of the Cold War, and the development of the so-called ‘McCarthyism’ aggravated the ‘Red Scare’ in the heads of the American people. While America had not been a country known for being a military force in pre-war times, this was clearly reversed after the Second World War was over. One of the inevitable consequences this change from peace to cruelty had on the American people was some sort of shock. Never had the citizens experienced what brutality human beings were capable of. Everything mentioned here contributed to the Americans having a feeling of unease about themselves and about their country. The predominant feelings of alienation and

disillusionment were mainly expressed in the artworks of that time. So *film noir* can be seen as symptomatic of American society and as a reaction to the darker sides of reality of the 40s and 50s.

Certainly, *film noir* was in its prime during the late 40s and 50s. Still, the concept has not died out yet and every once in a while there are films that are strongly influenced by *film noir* or which even represent some kind of homage to the classics of the genre. These modern films are referred to as new *noirish* films or *Neo-Noirs*. Before one particular *Neo-Noir* film – Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000) – will be discussed in detail, I will first of all focus on the characteristics of *Neo-Noirs* and secondly on the so called revenge films, because these are the two film genres or categories *Memento* (2000) fits into.

## 2. *Neo-Noir* Films

### 2.1 Definition and Characteristics

For some time there was a tendency among film critics to exclusively use the term or label *noir* for the classic films of the 30s, 40s and 50s referred to in chapter one of this paper. But in recent years, there has been increasing acceptance of a much more flexible use of the term, especially as far as a chronological broadening is concerned. On the one hand, the category of *film noir* is expanded to pre-World War Two times (e.g. *Underworld* 1927), and on the other hand, more importantly, it now includes the “burgeoning phenomenon of *Neo-noir*” (Crime Culture “Neo-Noir” 2002). So the *noir* category – many critics prefer to use the term category in this particular case instead of speaking of a strict genre (genres are e.g. western films or science fiction), because the label *film noir* invokes more a “network of ideas” or an “organising principle” – now exists for more than sixty years. The term *Neo-Noir*, firstly used by Todd Erickson, refers to films released after the classic period (especially in the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s), which fulfil central aspects of the classic films, “but take

other different generic approaches” (Watts 2002). These central aspects<sup>4</sup> are for example the storyline (dark crime stories), the visual style in terms of cinematography, the usage of symbolic lighting on characters to portray their characteristics, close ups, the narrative structure (especially flashbacks are a typical element in *film noir*), and of course the characters of the male protagonist (mostly a loner) and the femme fatale<sup>5</sup>. Many of the *Neo-Noir* films, especially of those created in the 70s and 80s<sup>6</sup>, including for example *Chinatown* released in 1974, can “be considered as pastiches that knowingly, and lovingly, recreate the style of earlier films albeit in colour and with a modern sensibility” (Lacey 2001). Most of these films express a “retro and nostalgic avoidance of contemporary experience” (Crime Culture “Neo-Noir” 2002), and sometimes it feels like they are an escape from contemporary issues. But there are also many *Neo-Noirs* which on the one hand “move the genre forward and so avoid pastiche”<sup>7</sup> (Lacey 2001). On the other hand, these films mirror the characteristics of modern culture and society – most of these films

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<sup>4</sup> Compare to chapter one.

<sup>5</sup> Flippo (1998) considers the following elements the key ingredients for classic *film noir*.

- a) Dark, shadowy, contrasty images filmed in black and white (a contribution of German Expressionism) -- often at night and usually in a gritty urban setting
- b) Required: Hard-boiled, cynical, disillusioned characters -- who are nevertheless usually likable
- c) A male protagonist facing a moral dilemma and/or some kind of threat
- d) An alluring, sassy, independent and usually dangerous woman (who often suffers for independence)
- e) Often: A crime or detective story (Cain, Chandler, Hammett)
- f) Flashbacks -- a wavering past and present, inextricably linked
- g) A voice-over narration (probably why I dislike the narrator-less so-called director's cut of "Blade Runner")
- h) Crisp, often witty dialog, sprinkled with great one-liners
- i) Often: A German, Austrian or Austro-Hungarian director of the German school (Curtiz, Lang, Maté, Preminger, Siodmak, Ulmer, Wilder, et al)
- j) A healthy dose of paranoia or, at the very least, a strong sense of insecurity, betrayal, or being trapped
- k) Angst, American style
- l) Required for "pure" film noir: NO happy ending. A happy ending turns a *film noir* into a *film gris* or a melodrama done in *noir* style.

<sup>6</sup> but also in the 90s, e.g. in and *LA Confidential* in 1997

<sup>7</sup> A completely new development of film noir is for example the fusion with the horror genre, like e.g. in David Lynch's *Lost Highway*. So noirish elements enter new film genres, and it's a movement away from the traditional detective story.

were released in the 90s. A good example of this is the *neo-noir* film *American Psycho* (2000) by Mary Harron and Guinevere Turner, because it perfectly describes the decadent culture of consumption which is part of every modern western society.

Comparing modern *Neo-Noirs* with the classic films there is another major difference besides the cinematic variations mentioned before: There is a recognizable influence on film by economical factors and ‘entertainment laws’ nowadays which makes a difference to the film production fifty years ago. It is obvious that times and taste have changed film (and *film noir*) and the viewers as well. A movie like *Se7en*, for instance, shot in the 90s that deals with the chase of a mass-murdering psychopath by two metropolitan detectives requires explicit and detailed description and pictures of violence to be credible. The viewer needs to see the harm done by a villain to accept the created illusion of a ‘madman’. This development is based on the fact that ‘film’ in most cases tries to be as realistic as possible to grab the audiences’ attention and therefore it progresses continuously by the use of advanced technology. It is open to argument whether this trend is a progress or often just the compensation of a weak story. If the brutality driven scenes are omitted from *Se7en*, the movie might even lose half its thrill - at least for a ‘modern’ audience. So the level of violence in modern noirish films is usually very high. Violence is often shown very explicitly whereas in the classic films it was up to the spectator to imagine the cruelties.

To sum it up one could say that the term *noir* has become widespread in academic discourse, and many modern *Neo-Noir* films have only a few elements in common with the classic films of the post-World War 2-period. But the film noir category is still alive and it persistently keeps on developing in different directions. The number of *Neo-Noirs* is very high. There have been more than 300 noir-influenced films<sup>8</sup> released since 1971 (Crime Culture “Neo-Noir” 2002), and noirish elements in films will most probably stay a popular

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<sup>8</sup> In 1992, for example, twenty-one Neo-Noirs were released.

ingredient of modern cinema. I'll now briefly focus on the role of revenge in modern film.

### **3. The *Revenge Film***

#### **3.1 Common characteristics**

Revenge has always been a very popular motive in literature. You can find it for example in the Bible ("An Eye for an Eye"), in many of Shakespeare's plays (like *Hamlet*), but also in contemporary literature. As far as films are concerned, one could say that revenge or vigilante justice have always been "vital elements" (Chamberlain 1995) especially of gangster films and *film noir*, – because "revenge is always associated with the gangster myth" (Chamberlain 1995) – but also of films belonging to other genres (e.g. historical films like *Gladiator* starring Russel Crowe, Western films, Science Fiction or Horror films like *A Nightmare on Elm Street*). One could say that while taking revenge for a crime is not accepted in modern societies, vigilantism is a very popular motive in film. No matter the genre, the expectations of the spectators are always the same: "If you're going to make a revenge movie, you've got to let the hero get revenge. There's a purity in that. So you set it up: the lead guy gets screwed over. And then you want to see him kill the bad guys - with his bare hands if possible" (Chamberlain 1995). Steinbacher gives a few more details about the typical plot of revenge films:

The standard equation seems to be this: Hero is betrayed. Hero recovers from betrayal and sets out to exact payback. Paybacks increase in grisliness (causing audience to whoop louder after each battle). Final payback is committed, usually in most obscene of fashion. *Fin*. This standard equation can be applied to nearly every revenge film, from the better (Mel Gibson's *Payback*) to the absolute worst (*I Spit on Your Grave*) (Steinbacher 2002).

Films involving violent crime often position the viewer to sympathise with the victim who enacts the revenge<sup>9</sup> by killing, “thus establishing the premise that revenge killing is justified” (Costello 2001). The reasons for this are quite obvious: Vigilantism in revenge films is often a sign of public frustration in today’s society, because in most cases the police and courts have “failed to deliver security and justice” in these films (Costello 2001). This consequently creates a situation that makes personal revenge<sup>10</sup> appear necessary and justified in the eyes of the spectators.

I’ll now focus on the analysis of the narrative structure of Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000), a very popular modern *neo-noirish* revenge film.

#### **4. Analysis of the narrative structure of Christopher Nolan’s *Memento***

##### **4.1 A Plot Summary**

Somewhere in LA, the present. Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) is a former insurance investigator whose wife was killed. Shelby tried to intervene on his wife’s murder but he couldn’t help her. While he was able to shoot down and kill one of the two anonymous intruders, the other one knocked him down and escaped. As a result of a head trauma he “sustained during the confrontation” with the intruders, he now suffers from “severe anterograde memory dysfunction” (*Memento Official Website* 2000). His short-term memory basically doesn’t exist any more – his current “attention span lasts roughly 15 minutes (and even less when he’s stressed or distracted” (Klein 2001) – , and he’s unable to create new long-term memories. The interesting thing about “this condition”, as Leonard himself calls it, is the fact that he can perfectly remember everything prior to the accident. He knows who he is, what his former job was, and he remembers what life with his wife was like. But when

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<sup>9</sup> Mostly revenge is taken for a murder or a rape. This crime is usually shown in the beginning of the revenge film or in flashback-scenes. The rape-revenge cycle can be read as one of the primary ways in which Hollywood has attempted to make sense of feminism and the changing shape of heterosexual femininity in the post-1970 period.

<sup>10</sup> usually by committing a murder

he wakes up in a cheap motel, he neither knows where he is, nor what he's doing there. He's even unable to remember people he met the day before. He can't trust anyone, and his whole life is a rather obsessive and paranoid sort of puzzle solving. But there is one thing in his life he knows for sure. He wants to take revenge. Nothing else matters to him.

Since the police couldn't help him find the murderer, Leonard starts to search on his own. He spends every waking moment trying to avenge his wife, but having this memory handicap makes finding the murderer extremely difficult. Therefore, Leonard has developed a couple of strategies to help himself remember the things he step by step finds out about the terrible crime. He takes Polaroids of everything and everyone and keeps them in his pockets, scrawling notes on the back as he goes along. He also tattoos the very important information on his body ("John G. raped and killed your wife." The license plate number. The fact that the murderer was a drug dealer etc.). He has a file on the police investigation into his wife's death several inches thick and a map of people and places with slots for pictures, notes and directions. He even has help by two rather dubious characters who definitely know more than they let on. One of them is Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss) whom Shelby trusts since she has lost a loved one, too. Lenny doesn't realize that she only wants to take revenge for her boyfriend – a drug dealer named James G. which was killed by Lenny before. In his eyes this guy was the murderer of his wife. But meanwhile, Lenny (of course) has forgotten this incident and is now searching for another "one and only murderer." The other character who pretends to help Lenny (but his real intentions seem to be slightly crueler) is Teddy (Joe Pantoliano) – whose real name is John G. and whose license plate number is the same as the number on Lenny's arm. In the end, this guy is killed by Lenny, as well.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> And maybe, 15 minutes later the whole hunt might start again. And it's certainly not very hard to find another John or James G. in a city like Los Angeles who coincidentally fits to some of his rather vague information.

The viewers of *Memento* easily find out, that they can't trust in the investigation of a mentally ill character like Leonard Shelby. There are several hints that human memory in general is unreliable and that we are dealing in this film with an extremely unreliable narrator. On the one hand, Leonard can easily become the object of other's manipulation. That means the information he has gathered might partly be useless and unreliable, because some guys want to deceive him (Teddy, for example). On the other hand, Lenny himself commits certain mistakes while collecting the data about his wife's murderer. For instance, he mistakes an I for a 1 while writing down Teddy's license plate number<sup>12</sup>. Later in the film the license plate has really changed according to Lenny's tattoo. So the message for the viewer is: Don't trust Lenny's pseudo facts because memory can manipulate everything or as Lenny puts it: "Memory can change the shape of a room; it can change the colour of a car. (...) They are just an interpretation, they're not a record." Interpretation and speculation are also very important when you try to understand *Memento*.

In addition to Leonard's revenge story there's also a very interesting sub-plot or parallel tale in *Memento*. It's the story of Sammy Jenkins and his wife: As an insurance investigator Leonard had a curious case. He had to find out whether Sammy Jenkins' anterograde amnesia – a result of a car accident this guy had had – was a mental or a physical problem. Leonard dismissed Sammy's condition as "psychological rather than physical, resulting in the refusal of Sammy's insurance claim" (the company didn't cover mental illness) (Belling 2001). Sammy's diabetic wife, thinking that if his amnesia problem is mental it must also be voluntary, tries to get him to "snap out of it by testing him in various ways" (Belling 2001; Klein 2001): Knowing that her husband loves her and that he would never do her any harm she finally asks him to give her three or four insulin shots in quick succession<sup>13</sup> – she always receives her insulin shots from her husband. Since Sammy doesn't realize the fact that he gives his wife an overdose, she sinks into an irreparable coma. Her husband

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<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of *Memento* according to the statement that you can never trust your memories see Duncker (2002).

<sup>13</sup> although getting more than one shot at a time can be very dangerous

“ends up institutionalized” (Belling 2001). What makes this sub-plot so interesting is the fact that the story of Sammy Jankins may in fact be the story of Leonard Shelby. Perhaps this whole parallel story wants to show the viewer that Leonard's own wife was killed not by a murderer but by Leonard himself<sup>14</sup>, and the revenge motivation was possibly planted by Teddy in order to make of Leonard a very efficient killer (Belling 2001).

Besides the rather interesting story told in *Memento* there is one thing that makes this film even more interesting: the narrative structure. I'll now focus on this particular aspect.

#### 4.2 The Narrative Structure

*Memento* has a very fragment and non-linear narrative structure. The use of a non-linear narrative is nothing new, as it has often been used in the past, especially by directors such “as Atom Egoyan (*Exotica*) and Wong Kar-Wai (*In the Mood for Love*), to slowly reveal relationships among characters and circle the story back to a key precipitating event” (Leong 2001). Such a structure has also been used by Quentin Tarrantino in *Pulp Fiction* and *Jacky Brown*, but in both films it was more or less a storytelling gimmick. In *Memento* it's completely different because in this film the fragment and non-linear narrative structure puts the audience into the shoes of the protagonist. Through this structure the viewers become detectives themselves. For a long time, they're struggling as much as Leonard does, to create a “coherent narrative out of all the pieces” (Fuchs 2001) they confront. Nolan gives the film *noir* genre's tendency to confound the viewers' expectations a conceptual twist by linking the flow of the narrative to” (British Film Institute 2000) the condition of the protagonist.

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<sup>14</sup> Because of his condition he might have forgotten the murder and might have made up a different scenario in his mind.

The whole film can be divided in 22 colour and 22 black and white sequences plus a very important opening credit. The function of these different types of scenes and the way they are arranged in *Memento* will no be discussed.

#### 4.2.1 Colour Scenes

According to the chronological order plot table by Daniel Zhu (2001) (compare to chapter 7 of this paper) the different colour scenes will from now on be described with letters from A to V, with A being the first sequence seen from a chronological point of view. The interesting thing about these colour sequences, which show the main story of Leonard searching for the murderer of his wife as a series of three-to-eight minute segments, is there reverse appearance in the film. Each of these rather small chunks represents the complete length of Shelby's memory capabilities (Holm 2001). The story is told backwards and scene by scene the audience gets more information about the reasons for the murder Lenny commits in the very first sequence of the film. It's kind of a puzzle solving. The viewers find new pieces of the puzzle in every new scene. But the meaning of most of these pieces is not evident from the sequence they firstly appear in. Just like a detective who step by step gets more circumstantial evidence while investigating, the viewers have to be extraordinarily attentive and wait for the sequence explaining a particular hint hidden in one of the preceding scenes. Thus a broken car window shown in one of the first colour sequences of the film (V) is not explained until scene M, which means that the viewers have to wait approximately fifty minutes to get the essential background information. But in some cases the spectators don't have to wait that long to get the necessary clues: For example, "a busted lip in one sequence is explained in the next," (Holm 2001) which actually happened right before, seen from a chronological perspective.

Since the story of *Memento* is told backwards – like mentioned before – it necessarily has to start at the end (V), showing Leonard killing Teddy, and finish near the beginning (A), showing Lenny killing Jimmy the drug dealer. The order of appearance of the colour sequences in the film is V,U,T,S.....D,C,B,A. Each of the colour scenes either ends exactly where the

previous one began or shows a particular part of the preceding scene once again, mostly from a different camera perspective. These repetitions of events launch the viewers “repeatedly into Leonard’s moment-to-moment existence by beginning again and again, as if it hasn’t begun before. In this way, “the movie (...) emulates Leonard’s own struggle to make sense of what’s happening to and around him” (Fuchs 2001). The repetition of events may remind some viewers of Tom Tykwer’s *Lola Rennt* (1998) or *Run Lola Run* as it was called in the USA. Christopher Nolan has elected the reverse structure with all these repetitions to confuse the audience and to put them in the head of the protagonist, who suffers anterograde amnesia.

I’ll now turn to a description of the black and white sequences in *Memento*.

#### **4.2.2 Black and White Scenes**

Besides the colour sequences which run in reverse order and tell the main story (compare to the chronological plot order table in chapter 7 in this paper: scenes A to V), there are also black and white scenes in *Memento* (scenes 1 to 22). These scenes alternate with the colour sequences and run in forward order. They show Leonard in his hotel room talking on the phone and telling the oddly parallel story of Sammy Jenkins, illustrated for the viewer with “visual flashbacks” (Klein 2001). The story told in the black and white scenes can be considered a frame plot that helps the viewers to understand when the things described in the colour scenes actually happen. The spectators find out that all the events described and shown in the black and white scenes happened before the story told in the colour scenes. So the black and white sequences are more or less a successively told flashback. And intentionally, the final black white scene (22) smoothly changes to colour and perfectly fits into the next colour scene (A), which is the last scene shown in the film. So the colour and the black and white scenes come together at the climax of the film – the scene showing Leonard kill Teddy (22, A, Opening Scene). To sum it up one could say that although the chronological order of the scenes in Nolan’s *Memento* is

1,2,3,4,5.....22,A,B,C,D,E.....V, Opening Sequence, the film actually plays the scenes like this: Opening Sequence, 1,V,2,U,3,T,4,S.....22,A.

As far as cinematography is concerned, the black and white sequences offer a very objective view of Leonard's character. The audience watches the protagonist in his hotel room from a third person or security camera point of view. The colour scenes, on the other hand, are very subjective and from Leonard's point of view. The camera is always kind of over his shoulder or right behind him in these scenes and there are many close-ups of the main character. The audience is shown details that only Lenny can see. Through this way of filming the protagonist a very close relationship between the viewers and Lenny is constructed.

No doubt, understanding the structure of *Memento* is not easy, especially when you're watching the film for the very first time. But it's interesting to see how director Christopher Nolan tries to help the viewers comprehend the narrative of this film. Already in the first view minutes of *Memento* there are several hints which can be considered a helping hand for the viewers or a guide to the narrative. The opening scene, which will now be described in detail, offers several of these hints mentioned.

#### **4.2.3 The Opening Scene**

The opening scene of Christopher Nolan's *Memento* is the only scene in the entire film that literally runs backwards and that is shown in slow-motion. This scene is probably supposed to help the viewers understand the narrative structure of *Memento*. In it, we see a Polaroid undevelop, a bullet fly back up the barrel of a gun and Teddy come back to life "after" the sound of a shot. So the viewers are reversely shown the revenge murder of Teddy committed by Leonard Shelby, an incident that actually takes place at the very end of the plot, seen from a chronological point of view. We see Lenny killing the man for "whom he will be searching throughout the entire film" (Shahinvar 2001). By recognising that everything in this particular sequence is running backwards the

viewers are perfectly sensitized to the mainly reverse narrative structure of the rest of the film. Their supposition about the reverse narrative is confirmed for the very first time in the third colour scene of *Memento* when the viewers realize that they are watching parts of the sequence they've already watched before, but additionally, they now get information about what happened in advance.

There's one more detail in this scene that has a meaning for the rest of the film. The vanishing colours on the Polaroid can be compared to Lenny's condition. Every new memory he tries to make is lost after a few minutes and cannot be recalled – in case he doesn't take photos of it or makes notes. After 15 minutes his brain is as blank as the Polaroid he holds in his hand at the end of the opening scene. So in this particular sequence the viewers are also introduced to Lenny's amnesia problem. Furthermore, the fact that the “undeveloping-process” of the Polaroid is not shown in one piece but in several parts gives the viewers another hint that the narrative of this film might not be as linear as the structure of most films.

## **5. Conclusion**

It's obvious that there is a conventional *noir* and revenge story behind *Memento*: A husband (former private investigator) seeks revenge on the person who murdered his wife and left him with his condition. The police couldn't help him find the murderer. The only help he has is his rather dubiously “motivated friend and a tough female barmaid” (Franklin 2001), who certainly has some character traits of the typical femme fatale. Furthermore, the whole story – and this is also typical of the *film noir* genre – plays in an absolutely anonymous, bleak, and empty environment that “accentuates the loneliness” (Shahinfar 2001) of the protagonist. Typical moods of classic *film noir*, such as alienation, bleakness, disillusionment, pessimism, evil, guilt and particularly paranoia, can be found in *Memento*. Additionally, the story is full of *noirish*

flashbacks and it has no happy ending. But what makes this film so special and different from other *neo-noir* or *revenge* films?

It's the uniquely structured narrative. Although the story behind the film is rather simple, the narrative structure is extremely complex and clever, which demands constant attention from its spectators. The amnesia problem of the protagonist and his chaotic and often pitiful attempts to step by step put the puzzle of his wife's murder together are intelligently linked to the way the whole story is told. The reverse narrative structure of the main plot with its conclusion being revealed in the first five minutes of the film, the alternation of colour and black and white sequences, and the fact that a few aspects of the film are shown more than once, are supposed to make the viewers feel as confused as Leonard is – of course, the closer the film gets to the end the less the viewers are confused because they can remember things Leonard can't. Franklin (2001) considers *Memento* a “sign of a film that may have had a low budget, but came together with a LOT of thought, cleverness and above all patience” (Franklin 2001). Because of the unique and complex style of story-telling this film not only requires but also deserves multiple viewings.

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## 7. The Chronological Order Plot Table<sup>15</sup>

Scene Number	Time (on DVD)	Story
1 black and white (bw)	2:35	Lenny wakes up in a hotel inn.
2 bw	6:24	Lenny explains his condition and makes a few notes.
3 bw	10:30	He's shaving his face. The phone rings.
4 bw	16:13	Lenny starts to tell the story of Sammy Jenkins (parallel plot).
5 bw	20:16	Lenny continues explaining.
6 bw	26:43	Lenny continues explaining with flashback of interviewing Sammy on his insurance claim.
7 bw	31:41	Lenny continues explaining with flashback of testing on Sammy and explains what is "conditioning".
8 bw	39:26	Lenny says he has "conditioning" ability which is different from Sammy.
9 bw	45:00	Lenny continues explaining with flashback of Sammy's desperate wife.
10 bw	48:54	Lenny continues explaining. Then the other side says to call back later. Lenny hangs up the phone.
11 bw	52:05	Lenny prepares to make a tattoo on his thigh: FACT-- Access to Drug
12 bw	53:33	Lenny continues preparing. Somebody calls in again.
13 bw	56:36	Lenny continues his talking on the phone. The other side mentions some drug information on the man Lenny is looking for. Lenny checks the police file.
14 bw	59:28	It seems that the information fits into the police file. So Lenny convinces himself that John G. is a drug dealer.
15 bw	1:02:36	Lenny changes "Access to Drug" to "Drug Dealer" and makes a tattoo for it. He continues his talking on the phone with flashback of Sammy's wife asking him his honest opinion about Sammy.
16 bw	1:09:19	Lenny suddenly finds the "Never Answer Any Call" tattoo on his arm. Lenny asks the other side "Who is this?". The other side hangs up the phone.
17 bw	1:12:56	The other side calls back. Lenny hangs it up and calls front desk Burt to block all the phone calls.
18 bw	1:17:14	Burt comes up, saying that a cop keeps calling. Lenny refuses to take the call again.
19 bw	1:21:41	The putative cop keeps calling and passes a photo under the door. In the photo, Lenny sees himself pointing to his own chest and smiling with blood all over the body.
20 bw	1:23:15	Lenny takes the call and asks why the other side calls him.
21 bw	1:26:29	Lenny tells the story of Sammy wife's final exam on Sammy and her death of overdose insulin.

<sup>15</sup> mainly based on Zhu, Daniel (2001)

Scene Number	Time (on DVD)	Story
22 bw	1:33:57	Lenny continues his talking on the phone, thinking he has got the information of John G or James G. He goes downstairs to meet the caller (Officer Gammel) and Teddy is there. He takes a photo of Teddy and wants to write down name Gammel. Teddy tells him to write Teddy, not Gammel. Teddy also tells him where Jimmy Grant (John G.) will show up. Lenny goes to the place, meets Jimmy and kills him. He changes into Jimmy's clothes. He takes the photo of Jimmy. While he is flapping the photograph, <b>the scene changes from black/white to colour and fits into the next scene (A) seamlessly.</b>
A colour (c)	1:39:42	After finishing flapping the photo, Lenny drags Jimmy to the basement. Teddy shows up. In their conversation, Teddy tells his version of the whole story to Lenny. Lenny doesn't believe or doesn't want to believe him. He tries to manipulate himself to set Teddy as the next John G target in order to kill him finally. He writes down "Don't believe his lies" on the back of Teddy's photo. He unloads his gun and burns the photos to fool himself that he never finishes the revenge. And he writes down Teddy's plate number as fact of John G's plate number. He drives Jimmy's car away with 20 grand in the trunk. He has some flashback in the mind, questioning the existence of world and memory stuff until he sees a tattoo shop.
B c	1:30:10	He goes into the tattoo shop and makes the tattoo of the licence number. Teddy catches up for the money in the trunk. He wants Lenny to leave the town. He also tells Lenny a story about another cop. Lenny has forgotten everything now. But he sees the words he has put down on Teddy's photo. He decides not to trust Teddy and sneaks away. He doesn't know where to go. He finds a note in the pocket of Jimmy's clothes, assuming it is for him. Following the notes, he goes to Ferd's bar to meet Jimmy's girl friend--Natalie.
C c	1:23:37	Since he is in Jimmy's clothes and car, Natalie wants to know what happened to Jimmy. She only knows that Jimmy is going to meet a guy named Teddy, who she doesn't know. And she also knows that there is a guy with mental problem around from a cop. She uses a disgusting method to test Lenny's memory problem.
D c	1:22:27	After the testing, Natalie thinks Lenny's problem is real.
E c	1:17:49	Natalie brings Lenny back to her house. They talk about the case on Lenny. Then Natalie goes back to work. After a while, Natalie comes back again and looks nervous.
F c	1:13:30	Natalie says Jimmy is missing and Jimmy's partner Dodd is looking for him and his 20 grand. Natalie tells Lenny that Dodd thinks she is involved and threatens her. She hopes that Lenny can help her by getting rid of Dodd. Lenny refuses at first. So Natalie hides all the pens in the house and begins provoking Lenny until Lenny hits her hard. She goes out, sitting in the car and waiting Lenny to forget everything. In the meantime, Lenny tries to find a pen to write these down.
G c	1:09:54	Natalie comes back. Lenny hasn't found a pen and forgets everything. Natalie lies to Lenny that she went to talk with Dodd as Lenny suggested but got beaten up. Lenny decides to help her. Natalie writes down Dodd's information for Lenny. Lenny goes to the car and sees Teddy inside.

Scene Number	Time (on DVD)	Story
H c	1:04:52	Teddy tells Lenny that Natalie is not trustful and both Natalie and Jimmy was involved in drug. They use cup pad to exchange information in the bar. He tries to let Lenny write down "Natalie is not trustful" on the back of Natalie's photo but fails. He tells Lenny not to go back and gives him the address (Discount Inn) of the place where Lenny lives. Lenny has forgotten where he lives apparently. And now he has forgotten the business on Dodd. Lenny decides to go back to his own place.
I c	1:00:10	He goes back to discount inn. He calls for a hooker. He has her try to re-create the scene from the night he and his wife were attacked.
J c	57:28	He wakes up in the night by the intended noise made by the hooker. He discharges the hooker and goes to a place to burn his wife's belongings.
K c	53:42	He burns the stuff and has some flashback of his wife.
L c	52:20	While Lenny is driving back from the place in Jimmy's car, Dodd spots the car coincidentally. Dodd begins to chase Lenny.
M c	49:22	Lenny runs away. He tries to find what is going on. He finds Natalie's note of Dodd's description and his address. He thinks the man chasing him is Dodd. He decides to go to Dodd's place to wait for Dodd and get rid of Dodd for Natalie.
N c	46:02	While he is sitting in the toilet at Dodd's place, he forgets what he is doing now. He thinks he is in his own room and begins to take a shower. Dodd comes back. Lenny thinks Dodd is an intruder and hits Dodd hard. He ties Dodd up. Now Lenny doesn't know what to do. He finds the note about Dodd and knows that he can contact Teddy or Natalie. He has only Teddy's number. So he calls Teddy to leave a message. He falls asleep while waiting Teddy.
O c	40:10	Teddy comes. Lenny has forgotten what happened. Anyway, they decide to send Dodd out of town. Lenny goes to Natalie's place to ask why he is involved with Dodd.
P c	36:26	Natalie explains it to Lenny. And Lenny sleeps in Natalie's house. Natalie sees the tattoos on Lenny's body and offers help to look up the plate number (Teddy's license number) of John G for Lenny.
Q c	28:32	In the next morning, Natalie writes Lenny a note to schedule the meeting with Lenny so Natalie can give the information on plate number to Lenny. When Lenny leaves the house, he bumps into Teddy again.
R c	22:54	He has a meal with Teddy, talking about the stuff on unreliable memory, etc. Then Lenny goes back to the discount inn. He finds out that the greedy Burt has checked him into two rooms actually. While talking with Burt, he finds he needs to go to see Natalie immediately.
S c	16:56	He meets Natalie. Natalie shows that the owner of the plate number is John Edward Gammel (Teddy) from San Francisco. She has got the copy of his driver license. She says that the person on the license photo looks familiar. She also tells Lenny a place which is good for killing. The place is the place where Lenny killed Jimmy.
T c	11:07	Lenny goes back to discount inn and begins to analyse the docs provided by Natalie. Of course, he draws the conclusion that Teddy is John G. He decides to kill him and calls Teddy to come.
U c	7:01	Lenny meets Teddy at the door of the inn.

Scene Number	Time (on DVD)	Story
V c	2:58	Lenny drives Teddy to the place and kills Teddy.
Opening Credit	00:00-2:34	This scene is not a new scene. Basically, it is the opening credit. And it plays back the part that Lenny is killing Teddy in reverse order. The normal order scene is at the end of V.