
Review of Memento (Director, Christopher Nolan, 2000)

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Abstract (Article Summary)

As Kierkegaard (1996: 161) posits, "life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards."

'Facts, not memories. That's how you investigate'.

Full Text (1,352 words)

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As Kierkegaard (1996: 161) posits, "life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards."

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So, what does the following tell us of any value to organizational enquiry? Anything? Or, do we use our interpretation of *Memento* in support of a case for fragmented nihilism? To the last question, we answer 'no'. However, we suggest that, within organizations there is a need for application of high levels of effort to generate a pragmatic understanding that has no *causa finalis* - no final cause or purpose (Nietzsche, 1968) - but that is socially constructed by reference to a set of shared 'facts' and 'meanings'. However, *Memento* demonstrates that the generation of such a set of artifacts is a complex process, and not without its risks. Also, we argue that much of what counts as fact in the outputs of research is, 'in fact', merely the socially constructed 'reality' of the researcher - telling us about their values and beliefs at a point in time, and not about those of their subjects.

The film's stylistic form echoes the thematic concern, by (famously) unfolding in reverse, at times with a somewhat disrupted chronology. Scenes begin where subsequent scenes end. Also, split-second images present the viewer with alternatives for interpretation - such as when Lennie (Guy Pearce) tells of his object-lesson, Sammy Jankis, injecting his wife with insulin, and we see these events. But, these shots are punctuated by those where we see Leonard repeating the action, injecting his wife. Such a moment opens up the idea that no one can ever understand their own lives or significance - that this can only be interpreted and reinterpreted by other people...

As Nietzsche (1968) posits, and as *Memento* illustrates, there is no *causa finalis* to human endeavor, in that even the simplest recorded 'fact' has meaning only in its usage, which is entirely context dependent. Even the *causa efficiens* - the efficient cause - may only be constructed on the basis of inadequate evidence and justification, as in *Lennie's case for killing John G (Joe Pantoliano) - the character shown to die at the outset - in*

circumstances for which the film first builds justification through regression. We are convinced of John G's guilt for the murder of Leonard's wife. But, we are later led to question the selection of this John G from the many (not Joe Pantoliano) - from the range of (non)characters that exist, that fit with the select and exclusive set of known 'facts' that constitute evidence at a point in time, yet fit nowhere.

Memento illustrates that, whilst we fully understand that we construct images of the future on the basis of what we think might happen, we also construct images of the past - history - on the basis of what we think (might have) happened, not what did (perhaps) happen.

Memento confronts the viewer with the poignancy of Leonard using his own body as an historical text - he relies on written notes, Polaroid images and tattoos. He constructs these images because he 'has a condition' in which he (is sure that he) remembers the past up to the point of his wife's murder, but he has no short-term memory. Yet, these images are unintelligible without interpretation, and even Lennie's interpretation is shown to be (literally) fatally flawed.

Our understanding of the present is shown to be a mental construct of our personal interpretation of the speech and action of self and others, based upon our 'filling in' of the gaps in the story line - the missing items of speech and action.

Natalie (Carrie-Ann Moss) assists Leonard in 'constructing his memories' of the past, and her kindness is at first read as being key to his interpretation of his need for, and justification of, revengeful action.

Natalie (Carrie-Ann Moss) assists Leonard in 'constructing his memories' of the past, but her 'kindness' is later shown to be to suit her own ends - to align with her own interpretation of need and justification....as researchers may construct their interpretation of the memories of their subjects in order to suit their personal research agendas.

We witness this cruelty of Natalie (and of others) who is quick to spot her chance to exploit Lennie's weakness. The film later reveals the premeditated nature of her cruelty in the cinematic moment where she incites him to hit her - to produce the required evidence of the cruelty of others - having first hidden all the pens, so he cannot write the incident down and, thus, remember what has happened. This cruelty is counterpoised with the sympathy and compassion that we have earlier (in the viewer's time) seen her bestow upon Lennie, to which he has gone great lengths to record for future reference.

The content and actions in *Memento* exaggerate the universal human condition - our memories are fallible, and our understanding of situations is ephemeral. Yet we seek 'truth' based upon our unquestioning resort to historical narrative and the power of image, our belief in the written word, and in the 'expert witness'.

The inability of photographs and writing to be ultimate truths, the inability of such artifacts to escape the need for interpretation, is shown by the film to be Lennie's

ultimate weakness - his belief that there are facts that represent some form of absolute 'reality' that sits above and beyond interpretation.

If we cannot rely on memories, then recorded facts are all that we can rely on - yet we cannot rely on them when they are disconnected from the context of construction as 'fact'. How often do we see scientists present their explanations of the 'real meaning' of artifacts and records from past civilizations, and from these construct detailed descriptions of how these people lived, thought, and believed? As Feyerabend (1993) says, the understanding that is presented by science from within its own context of justification that is devoid of understanding of the context of origination is no 'real' understanding.

Lennie...his clothes aren't his, his car isn't his his memories - even his long term memories - are not there

The inability of man to function without something to live by

he has had to create a false past and fix it to himself because the real one is too awful his misplaced faith that it is his new and recent past that is in flux rather than that all memories are unreliable

In undertaking 'research' - whether the academic studying organizations, or the detective studying the murder - the process is frequently one of 'understanding backwards', i.e. looking at effect and cause. Once this is done, the process of constructing a rational(ized) account turns this into a story of cause and effect - i.e. imposes chrono-logical rationality upon it.

The film taunts the human desire for a narration with a finite story line...Leonard cannot stand the ambiguity of not knowing who killed his wife (actually he cannot stand the guilt of having done it himself), but the film's story subverts, refuses to feed this need, by unfolding backwards. It then shows that the story is anything but done...providing that cliché of the mystery genre, the 'final-reel revelation' (Darke, 2000) by putting it at the beginning. Then, it shows that this ending is not supported by the beginning - that is shown at the end!

So, is the ending of the project of the organizational researcher - the academic journal/conference paper that is presented to the audience as the introduction to the subject - really supported by the beginning - the thinking/acting/being of the subjects of that research?

What you have recently read, in the last paragraph, is just a memory - the only meaning that exists for it is that of your own construction and interpretation.....as it currently exists.

Note that this writer uses the name 'Leonard', *which is the character's preference.*

Note that this writer uses the name 'Lennie', *which the character professes to hate*.

If you haven't seen *Memento*, you should. Do not rely on our memories, recollections and (re-/mis-)interpretations of it.

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