

Not the *auteur* theory – *Memento* (USA: 2000)

Director: Christopher Nolan

Screenplay: Christopher Nolan and Jonathan Nolan

Editor: Dody Dorn

Music: David Julyan

Producers: Jennifer Todd and Suzanne Todd

Cinematographer: Wally Pfister

Cast: Guy Pearce, Carrie-Anne Moss, Joe Pantoliano

During the 1960s the weaknesses of the ‘director as author’ approach (see section 4.3) had become apparent. The idea of *auteurism* had been extended to producers (such as Val Lewton’s horror B pictures) and actors (Mae West). In harmony with the intellectual currents of the time, *auteur-structuralism* had attempted to develop the ‘theory’ by offering a rigorous analysis of films rather than vague references to themes and style:

With its emphasis on the importance of systematically analysing a body of texts, *auteur-structuralism* conceives of the author as a set of structures identifiable within a director’s films. (Crofts, 1998, p. 315c)

Academics attempted to deconstruct the common themes and style of ‘John Ford’ rather than try and work out what John Ford was attempting to say. Apart from greater rigour, as Croft notes, there was little difference in the approaches. The idea that great directors somehow managed to transcend the commercial constraints of Hollywood remained the critical premise. By jettisoning the ‘high art’ vs. ‘mass culture’ opposition, academics were able to engage with more films in a much more interesting fashion and so the focus switched to analyses of genre and narrative. To try and make sense of *Memento* as a film by an *auteur* is nonsense as it was only Christopher Nolan’s second feature (the first was *Following*, 1998).

Memento shows up both the strengths and weaknesses of Hollywood. On the one hand it is a dazzling genre movie using a British writer and director, an Australian star and American character actors; on the other it required ‘a novice distributor as no other company would touch it’. (Klein, 2001) Hollywood doesn’t concern itself with any ‘high art-low culture’ debate, as far as it is concerned films are one thing: a commodity. If backers don’t believe they are going to make money then there is no reason for them to put money into a film. *Memento*’s unusual narrative structure (it runs backwards) has ‘difference’ ‘in spades’ and conservative accountants can’t factor (too much) novelty onto their balance sheets without hallucinating about red ink. Despite this, the movie took over \$25m in North America alone, a large amount for an independent production. It benefited from positive word of mouth, a brilliant distribution strategy and the fact that its narrative demanded multiple viewings.

Generically *Memento* is a *film noir* with its lone wolf protagonist falling victim to the *femme fatale* (Natalie – Carrie-Ann Moss). In addition, it has a convoluted narrative that blurs the line between good and evil and, in its flashback (or is that flashforward?) sequences, an Expressionist visual style. However, the most intriguing aspect of the film is its narrative structure that, literally, starts in reverse. This kicks us into a cycle of scenes that start five minutes in the past and run until they reach the moment we left the last cycle. Interspersed between the cycles Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) tells his story to someone on the telephone.

The film has been likened to a jigsaw; once all the pieces are in place then the narrative has coherence. However, because the subject of the narrative is memory, we can never be certain of anything. Shelby knows ‘we all need memories to know who we are’ but he cannot ‘remember to forget’ his dead wife. Part of the pleasure of *Memento* is trying to piece the jigsaw together (does it make sense?); the other fascinating aspect is its philosophical investigation into the subjective nature of our understanding of reality.

Stephen Crofts (1998) ‘Authorship and Hollywood’ in eds. Hill & Gibson [The Oxford Guide to Film Studies](#) (OUP)

Andy Klein (2001) ‘Everything you wanted to know about *Memento*’ (Salon, 28th June)

For more on narrative structure see chapter two of *Introduction to Film*