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Changing States: The globalized economy of the late 1990s as represented in Christopher Nolan's *Memento*

There is a force seeking global domination; it dwells in a lair of knowledge and eats trust for breakfast. Situated on a hot bed of information technology, it breeds through a complex consummation of communication. Born twenty-something years ago, it was thoughtfully named Economic Globalization. Progression through globalization in the 1990s led the economy to earn another new nickname for itself – a knowledge economy. This new terminology marked a move away from an industry-based economy to an asset-based economy, which relies on the rapid intake of previous knowledge to make short-term predictions. Notably, Leonard Shelby, the main character in Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), conducts his life through the same process. This process pivots on the immediate acceptance of knowledge through developed systems of trust. Nolan mimics this force by weaving macro notions of trust and knowledge into the cyclically flawed micro decisions of Leonard, a vigilante plagued by a trauma-induced inability to make short-term memories. In doing so, Nolan uses Leonard to allegorize the potentially detrimental development of the United States into a globalized knowledge economy.

Crucial to understanding a knowledge economy is understanding the meaning of knowledge. Nolan challenges typical notions of knowledge through Leonard's inability to learn new things. Specifically, Leonard's systematic alternative to knowledge – one of disciplined note-taking, collecting, and tattooing – is unlike conventional learning in that Leonard is not forced to make educated connections on his own; rather, he collects past knowledge and simply

applies it to his present situation: “Collecting replaces the work of making things with the work of retrieving, cataloguing, and shelving things” (Little 81). This dynamic differentiates between using the learning process to reach an answer, and, in Leonard’s case, using a pre-existing answer to determine a future process. Thus, Leonard’s inability to produce new memories is representative of a grander cycle that “transforms consumption into a form of production” (Little 81). Just like Leonard consumes the information on his body, knowledge-workers consume the information made available by ever-advancing information-technology. In both instances, the inflow of information is always changing – after all, whenever Leonard reads one of his tattoos or notes, he might as well be seeing it for the first time. Similarly, the globalized market “demands high-tech knowledge workers who display a high degree of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty and who are skilled in techniques of improvisation” (Sahay 1). Essentially, the market is hiring a generation of Leonards – people capable of fast decision-making based on ever-fluctuating knowledge (Sahay 1). Leonard’s conditioned method of learning clearly embodies that of the emerging class of knowledge workers.

This new-age knowledge worker is also working to dissolve pre-established corporate hierarchies. Hierarchies in the business world require some sort of ladder of authority based on, among other things, accountability and reliability. However, a shift is occurring in traditional forms of hierarchy because “knowledge is treated as a scarce resource and is therefore concentrated...at higher levels of the organization” (Adler 216). Given the nature of knowledge-based work, as aforementioned, this new structure is often viewed as detrimental because “institutions structured by this mechanism may be efficient in the performance of routine partitioned tasks but encounter enormous difficulty in the performance of innovation tasks requiring the generation of new knowledge” (Adler 216). This hierarchal flaw provides an

uncanny description of Leonard's condition, yet in Leonard's case, the absent, reliable authority figure is that of his own memory. Nolan yet again shows the dangers of such a trend not only through Leonard's blatant misadventures, but through Leonard's favorite parable, Sammy Jenkis. Sammy is revealed through Leonard's flashbacks, dating before his debilitating accident, as one of Leonard's insurance cases. As it turns out, Sammy had a very similar memory deficient condition to Leonard. However, Sammy's ability to perform the "routine partitioned task" of giving his wife daily insulin shots ultimately leads to his inadvertent murder of his wife, whose death proves Sammy's inability to form new knowledge – in this case, the memory of having already given his wife her daily shot, leading to her overdose. It seems no coincidence that Leonard always appears as a business man in the segments involving Sammy, which is perhaps Nolan's way of associating Sammy's situation with the new world of business and its restructured hierarchies.

Through building such negative representations of knowledge workers and their role in restructuring corporate hierarchies as Sammy Jenkis, Nolan begins to elucidate a much more fundamental, and revealingly hazardous, question of the globalized knowledge economy — is any of it reliable? While reliability is hugely impacted by subjectivity, which will be discussed later, it centers around rather complex notions of trust. It seems fatally circumventive to supplant reliability with trust; however, in order to efficiently excel using constantly new information, the knowledge economy and Leonard must rely on trust. For instance, in order for Leonard to maintain relationships, he takes photographs of his acquaintances and writes down what he deems noteworthy. When Leonard reencounters these acquaintances, he places all of his trust on his notes and attempts to continue the relationship. This system is by no means perfect,

as illuminated in one particular discussion he has with Teddy, a cop who appears to be helping Leonard avenge his wife's alleged assassin:

Teddy: You wanna make a note that you can't trust [Natalie].

Leonard: Why's that?

Teddy: Because she'll have taken one look at your clothes and your car and started thinking of ways to turn the situation to her advantage...

Leonard: Why should I care?

Teddy: She's gonna use you. To protect herself...She doesn't know anything about your investigation, so when she offers to help you, it'll be for her own reasons. (Memento 114)

Teddy's concern is emblematic of similar concerns with the knowledge economy. While trust enables communication, a major keystone in a globalized economy, it is also flawed. "Trust has its own dark side. Trust can fail us because it makes betrayal more profitable" (Adler 226). As Teddy has realized, Leonard's faith in Natalie is unfounded, as she most likely has her own interest in mind, as opposed to the interest of Leonard. Similarly, Leonard's skepticism of Teddy's information is because Teddy is not part of his trust system – that is, from Leonard's point of view, Teddy has no established interest in Leonard's situation. This cycle of speculation is very similar to the grander cycles of interest and speculation that keep the globalizing economy churning. However, when speculation based on unsound interest compiles, it leads to the downside of capitalistic cycles. This has proven itself time and again in instances ranging from the Great Depression of the 1930s to the dot-com bubble burst of the late 1990s. Whether speculative interest is based on a system of stocks and trading or on a system of notes and tattoos, it is ultimately a boom and bust system, which is, by definition, unreliable.

This tragic unreliability of a trust-based system within a cyclical framework is perhaps Nolan's primary message. After all, arguably the most striking feature of *Memento* is its unconventional structure. While formally this structure serves to disorient the viewer as Leonard is himself disoriented, it also places the viewer "into a void of endless interpretation and

constantly displaced coherence” (Sahay 2). This not only mimics the nature of knowledge-based work but also actively displays the necessity for personal subjectivity in a world based on fragmented information. This is where Nolan connects the dots of his economic commentary – if everything is based on trust, and trust is based on subjectivity, then reality is really an illusionary amalgamation of everyone else’s ideas. As a result, single truths globalize into a collective trust, and with no hierarchy of accountability, no one will be there to pick up the pieces when it all comes crashing down to reality. Thus, the economy seeks a similar fate – or rather, tragic cycle – as Leonard, who is ultimately revealed to be a repetitive murderer manipulated by his own faulty “knowledge-based” system.

Amidst the disorientation that is *Memento*, Nolan does provide one intelligible constant throughout the film – nondescript images of middle-class America. Nolan’s vague, indefinable scenes of America suggest that America’s identity, just like Leonard, is in flux. Furthermore, the middle-class of America will be the most impacted by globalization (Friedman 22). Thus, it is the American middle-class at which Nolan’s message is directed. Nolan’s use of form and content confront the viewer with the negative implications of a globalized knowledge economy and address its shaky foundations. Whether these shaky foundations come from an incident of trauma or an unconventional form of narrative, they ultimately allegorize the instability of the economy, with its shaky foundation being the very nature of its knowledge base. Forcing ambiguity and disorientation on the viewer is really an interactive means of forcing the viewer to slow down the process, to refuse blind trust, and to organize their thoughts into local solutions.

Works Cited

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